

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
UFO SIGHTINGS





in

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OF THE
UFO SIGHTINGS**

Bob and Pete hold their breath as unreal bright light shimmers through the trees and a spaceship lands in the woods around Rocky Beach. For Pete one thing is certain—extraterrestrials are taking over our planet! Jupiter, the leader of The Three Investigators reacts calmly to his friends' UFO sighting. Then another eyewitness appears and the investigators receive a video recording of the UFO and extraterrestrials. Jupiter becomes suspicious, and the three go to examine the landing site of the spaceship again, without suspecting that they are already expected there...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the UFO Sightings

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1. Fire in the Sky

The night sky was deep black and starry. Out here in the mountains of Santa Monica, neither the lights nor the smog of Los Angeles had a chance to disturb the view of the stars. The big city could only be recognized as a vague glimmer of light on the eastern horizon.

The moon hadn't risen yet. Between the thousands of points of light that pierced the black sky with crystal clarity, a blurred sphere shone as the brightest celestial body with a glowing tail that vanished in the darkness of the night.

"Let me see that!" Pete tried to rip Bob's binoculars out of his hand.

"Don't panic, he's not gonna run away from you," Bob said. "Chandra 7 will be with us for a few more weeks before disappearing back into the depths of space."

"And only comes back three thousand years later," Pete added. "That's why I want to see it up close now! Because I don't think I'm gonna live that long."

"Three thousand two hundred and twenty-six years," Bob corrected his friend.

Pete twisted his eyes. "You already sound like Jupe. But please spare me more comet details. I just want to see it."

Bob sighed and lowered his binoculars and handed them to the Second Investigator. "That's just typical. What's the use of staring at the comet if you don't know what you're seeing? Too bad our First Investigator isn't here. He could tell you a lot of interesting things about Chandra 7 right now—a lot more than me. But Jupe preferred to stay at home."

"You know him," Pete remarked. "When I suggested that he come here to the mountains with us to watch the comet without the distracting lights of the city, he turned pale. Only because we took the bikes. If we'd come by car, he'd have come with us."

"He himself knows very well that the exhaust fumes will certainly not help him to see the comet better." Bob looked around. They were standing on a small, dark parking lot on the mountain road that meandered through the forests of the Santa Monica Mountains. In the south, the lights of the coastal towns could be seen, in the north only the silhouettes of the trees stood out darkly from the star-studded sky.

There were hardly any people living in this deserted area and only every few minutes a car passed by. "Perfect. It is so dark here that I can photograph the comet with a long exposure without any problems. No stray light will mess up my shot." Bob went to his bike and took his photographic equipment out of the saddlebag.

"It's great," Pete said as he looked through the binoculars. "There's this boulder flying through space and the whole world is staring up. Why is that thing glowing? Is it lit by the sun, like the moon?"

"No. As the comet approaches the sun, it continually releases huge amounts of dust and ice crystals which then react with the solar wind. This results in a tail that we see as glowing."

"It's throwing out dust? Shouldn't it be disintegrated by now? I mean, the comet isn't that big after all."

"Actually it has a diameter of almost thirty kilometres," Bob explained. "It's been a few thousand years since it started disintegrating. Besides, it only loses matter when it is near the sun, like now. For the rest of its long journey, it is calm."

“Thirty kilometres! That’s quite a chunk,” Pete exclaimed. “What happens if it crashes onto Earth...”

“But it won’t,” Bob explained. “In a few days it will reach the closest to our planet, but even then it is still a few million kilometres away. That’s lucky for us. If it really crashes down, no grass would grow here for a long time. Some years ago, Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 crashed onto the planet Jupiter. Despite it being a giant gas planet, the collision on the surface has caused some vortices.”

“What people used to think when they saw a comet,” Pete thought. “They had to believe that the sky was falling on their heads.”

“They did. Halley’s Comet, for example, flies past the earth every seventy-six years. In the past, there were new doomsday theories every time and people were scared and crawled under the blanket. Against that boulder up there, Halley’s Comet just a pebble.” Bob said as he set up the tripod. “Do you remember Comet Hale-Bopp? That was another comet that visited us not long ago. At that time, almost forty members of an obscure cult committed suicide somewhere near here—just because of a boulder racing through space.”

“That’s right. That was in San Diego,” Pete remarked. “The cult believed that a UFO was hiding in the tail of the comet wanted to take their souls on board. Pretty scary. How do people come up with such beliefs?”

“I don’t know,” Bob added. “But this proves that there are people who are still stuck in the dark Middle Ages—despite all the high-tech, highways and skyscrapers. In the past, angry gods were held responsible for unusual appearances in the sky, today they are UFOs.”

“That’s right. One should assume that every half-educated person knows enough about comets. UFOs in a comet’s tail! Don’t make me laugh!”

“Oh, yeah?” Bob looked up from his work on the tripod and grinned at Pete. “Who asked me why comets glow and why they are not disintegrated by now? Are you one of those less educated people?”

Pete didn’t let himself be provoked. “I admit I don’t have much of a clue. But that doesn’t mean I believe in UFOs.” He looked through the binoculars again. “You can really see it amazingly well tonight. I hope your photo turn out to be something.”

Bob had meanwhile attached the camera to the tripod and aimed it at the comet. Now he set the exposure time. “I hope so, too. Because then we can show Jupe what he missed. I still can’t understand why he didn’t come here. In Rocky Beach, Chandra 7 cannot be seen clearly with all the lights there.”

The three boys lived in the Californian coastal town of Rocky Beach near Los Angeles and had set up a small detective business there. Their headquarters was located in an old mobile home trailer at The Jones Salvage Yard, which was operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

“Now get out of the way, Pete,” Bob said. “Otherwise, you’ll be in the picture.”

The Second Investigator turned around and grinned into the camera. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Move!” When Pete had reluctantly cleared the field, Bob pressed the trigger. “I’m setting another exposure time. Anyway, I’m not sure if this would turn out well.”

Pete raised his binoculars again and searched the sky for the comet. Suddenly he stopped. “Bob!”

“Huh?”

“Bob, look!”

“Wait, I just want to pick out a new lens.”

“Bob!”

“My goodness, what is it?”

Instead of answering, Pete tapped Bob's shoulder and pointed his finger up. Bob looked up and froze. In the sky over the forest an oval, light blue shining object was seen. Its distance and size were difficult to estimate. It hovered in the air.

"Do you see that?" Pete cried.

"Yes, yes, I see it," Bob replied. "What in the world is that?"

They stared spellbound at the shining disc. "Where did it come from?" Bob asked.

Pete's voice sounded nervous and shrill as he answered: "I don't know! It just appeared there suddenly!"

"Maybe it's a weather balloon?" Bob speculated.

"A disc-shaped weather balloon? Where'd you get that?" Pete exclaimed. "If I hadn't just claimed not to believe in UFOs, I would say—my goodness!"

The object suddenly lost height and plunged vertically. Only shortly over the forest it stopped and remained hovering in the air. "Whatever this is, it cannot be a weather balloon!" Pete said.

"The camera!" Bob shouted and ripped it off the tripod. "I need to take a photo!"

"Look! Now it's moving again!" The light blue disc tilted slightly to the side, flew to the right, remained, swung around and floated in the other direction. Bob kept pressing the trigger.

"Now... now it's coming at us!" Bob shouted. "Wait! It stopped. There, it's landing!"

Suddenly the object was swallowed by the trees. For two seconds the light blue reflection could still be seen over the dark tree tops, then too it was gone.

"It flew into the woods." Pete was still looking up, but the object didn't reappear. Eventually, the Second Investigator broke his silence and said, "What was that?"

Bob shook his head. "I don't know. But I want to know! Now!"

Pete stared at him in horror. "You don't want to..."

"Pete, that thing landed in the woods!" Bob cried.

"Landed? I don't think I heard you right!" Pete said. "Probably it was just flying a little lower, so we can't see it now."

Bob shook his head again. "Haven't you been watching its trajectory? First it hovered, then it flew back and forth, as if looking for a landing place, and finally it came down."

Pete frowned reluctantly. "You don't really mean that this is a..."

"I mean, we need to get into the forest right now to find this thing. Then we'll know what it was."

Pete turned around quickly and ran to his bike.

"What are you trying to do, get out of here?" Bob shouted.

"No. I'm just taking off my bike lights so we have light when we go into the woods. I can't let you go alone, even if I'm dying of fear."

"I don't feel any different. Let's go!" Bob was about to stow away his camera, but Pete held it back.

"You have to take that with you, of course!"

Bob hit his forehead. "You're right."

They shoved their bikes behind a bush so it couldn't be seen from the road. Then they ran to the edge of the forest. A small hiking trail led into the impenetrable darkness.

2. Lost in Darkness

They hurried along the uneven forest road. The bicycle lamp cut a sharply outlined cone of light into the darkness. Anything more than five metres away was in pure darkness. To the left and right the bizarre silhouettes of the trees glided past.

"You can barely see your hand in front of your eyes," Pete whispered involuntarily and then turned around. "I can't already see the road behind us. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all."

"As long as you have your lamp, it should be fine." Bob tried to calm his friend and himself.

"And what if that was a UFO after all? Then this stupid lamp can't help us either," Pete murmured. He already regretted going into the forest.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, what do we do when we meet aliens?"

Before Bob could say anything, something suddenly rustled beside them. Pete stopped in shock and shone into the bushes. A shadow scurried away.

"Just a rabbit," Bob remarked uncertainly. "Not an alien, anyway. All we saw was a strange, glowing disc in the sky. No UFOs. I'm sure there's a harmless explanation for that."

"Oh yeah? Then why do we run like idiots through a pitch-black forest in the middle of the night?"

"To find that explanation."

"How? We don't even know how far that thing is from us," Pete remarked. "It could have been a few hundred metres, or a few easy kilometres. Depending on how big it was. It's absolute ridiculous what we're doing here. We can't see a thing! Shouldn't we turn back?"

"Now that we're here, we should move on," Bob found. "What did you expect? Festive lights? We're in the forest at night, so logically it's dark."

The path ended in front of a dense wall of straight tree trunks. Only after a few moments did they realize that that was a fork in the road. To the left and right the path continued. When they stopped, they noticed that the forest was not as quiet as they had thought. Everywhere something rustled or cracked. Pete turned his head back and forth to locate the source of the eerie sounds.

But the darkness was impenetrable. "Which way should we go?" he asked nervously.

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Do you know your way around here?"

"Where from? I'm not even sure we're going in the right direction. Since we can only see a few metres ahead, the path could make a turn without us knowing."

"Then it won't matter which way we go anyway." Bob turned right.

"You got a lot of nerve," Pete mumbled and followed him. This way was no different from the other.

A few hundred metres further, Pete stopped abruptly. "There!" he whispered, pointing into the darkness to the left of the path.

"What?"

"I'll turn off the lamp and you'll see better!"

A bluish flicker shimmered through the dense forest. It was weak and far away, but obvious.

"That must be it!" Without another word Bob left the forest path and fought his way through the undergrowth.

"Are you crazy?" Pete hissed, but had to follow him. "You don't really want to go!"

"Keep your voice down. That's why we're here!" Bob replied and immediately cursed it. "Damn!"

"What is it?" Pete enquired.

"I hit my shin bone, on a tree trunk or something," Bob cried softly. "Damn darkness! Turn the lights back on!"

"What? If we keep marching with the light on, they'll see us!" Pete whispered.

"Who is them?"

"The... the... what do I know!" Pete answered. "We'll definitely be seen! The light stays out!"

Carefully they felt their way with their feet. They were moving slower now. The closer they came to the eerie glow, the louder was the rustling of the leaves and the cracking of the branches. They could also hear themselves panting. Pete was afraid they could be heard miles away.

"Can you see anything?" Bob asked.

"Just the blue light," Pete said looking through his binoculars. "It's hard to estimate how far away it is. Wait! Wait! There's something else! A... a shadow!"

"Let me see!" Bob simply took the binoculars out of Pete's hand. "There's a figure moving in the light. I can't see much. But there's someone there."

"Or anything," Pete replied and a shiver ran through him.

"Hey!" Bob suddenly called out softly. "The light's gone!"

Pete stared into the black night. The bluish glimmer had disappeared without a trace. Around them there was deep darkness. Silently they waited a few minutes, hoping and afraid that the light would come back. But nothing happened.

Suddenly an owl hooted. Pete flinched. "Should I turn the lights back on?"

"I don't know."

"Then I'll turn it on." The unexpected glow dazzled them, but it was good to see something again. On the other hand, the world was now full of deep black shadows dancing around as Pete moved the lamp. "Do we turn back... or do we move on?"

"Do you think that thing's still there?"

"Even if it did, we wouldn't know what it is until we go nearer. I wouldn't find that particularly pleasant."

"What was that all about? What did we see there, Pete?"

"I don't know. And I'm not so sure I want to know anymore. That's too creepy for me. We should go back."

Suddenly Bob noticed something. "Is it my imagination, or is your lamp getting weaker?"

The Second Investigator looked directly into the beam of light. "I'm afraid you're right. The batteries are pretty old."

"Then we should go back," Bob said. "Now!"

They turned back. The lamp quickly weakened and soon the light was no longer sufficient to illuminate the floor directly in front of them. Finally, it went out completely. Pete and Bob stopped hoping that their eyes would get used to the darkness. But the darkness

remained impenetrable. The light of the stars and the comet was too weak to penetrate the dense canopy of leaves above them. They had no idea how to proceed on.

“What are we going to do now?” Pete whispered.

“We could just keep going,” Bob suggested uncertainly. “If we keep going in that direction, we should get back on track. We’ll know when we’ve reached it.”

But Bob was wrong. After just a few metres, dense undergrowth blocked their path and when they wanted to circle it, they lost their sense of direction.

“Bob?” shouted Pete, who suddenly had the feeling of being alone. “Bob, where are—ah!”

“What happened?” Bob’s voice sounded right next to him.

“Something touched my face.”

“Probably just cobwebs. I just had a few on my face, too.”

Pete moaned. “I want out of this forest now.”

“So do I. I feel pretty stupid. Like Hansel and Gretel. Only now we needed self-luminescent breadcrumbs to find our way back.”

“And I promised my mother I’d be home by 11:00 pm.” Pete briefly flashed the lamp on his wristwatch. “That’s in two minutes. She’s gonna be so upset.”

“In a few minutes, yes. But if you’re still not back in two hours, she’ll be worried about everything.”

“Two hours?” Pete asked, startled. “Do you think it’ll take us that long to find our way out of this forest?”

“Find our way out? What do you mean? If you haven’t noticed it yet, there’s no point in going any further if we don’t even know which way the road is going.”

Suddenly something rustling close to them in the undergrowth.

Pete flinched. “What was that?”

Bob also held his breath. In a trembling voice, he said: “Just an animal. I hope so.”

Pete sighed. “Are we supposed to wait until sunrise now? Spend hours in a forest where you can’t see your hand in front of your eyes, where there’s rustling everywhere and where maybe some aliens are running around?”

“Looks like it.”

Suddenly, there was a shrill scream going through the woods.

3. The Orange Valley

Pete spun around. "That wasn't an animal!"

The scream repeated itself. But this time it came from another direction. Bob spun around staring into the impenetrable darkness. "It sounds like a child."

"A child? Here in the woods, in the middle of the night?" Pete exclaimed. Again the shrill call sounded. Again he came from another direction. "There'd have to be three children by then."

Suddenly Bob laughed with relief. "I think I know what it is. Tawny owls! They utter these terrible screams at night to separate their territories from each other."

"Owls? Birds can scream like that? It sounded like a torture chamber!" Pete shivered. "Let's get out of here, Bob. Who knows, maybe... maybe that really was a flying saucer. And it's possible the aliens are still wandering around somewhere. Maybe they're watching us all the time with infra-red light or something!"

"Don't drive me crazy, Pete! I'm queasy enough as it is. Let's better find a place where we can sit down and wait," Bob suggested and slowly made his way groping.

Pete followed him. Suddenly, something stroked his face. He screamed.

"What is it? What have you got?" Bob shouted.

"Something was on my face! But not cobwebs!" Pete cried. "Someone touched me!"

"Sorry, that was the branch I had just bent to the side."

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. "Goodness, Bob. Warn me next time you throw half a tree in my face."

"As always, you're exaggerating."

Soon they had found a fallen tree trunk and sat down. Silently they listened to the eerie screams of the birds coming from all sides. Both looked around again and again, but the blue glow did not reappear.

"Damn," Bob murmured after a while. "I would have loved to know what that was. But now it's probably gone and we have missed the chance of finding it."

"Actually I'm very glad about that," Pete said. "I hope it's really gone. I feel so watched. Hey, tell me, am I imagining this or has it actually got a little brighter since we've been sitting here? I can suddenly see that big stone over there."

Bob looked up. The tops of the trees shimmered in silver light. "The moon! We are lucky. We almost have a full moon. If the sky remains clear, the light should be enough in a few minutes for us to move on."

He was right. While the moon slowly appeared in the sky, the light fell deeper and deeper into the forest. The black shadows became grey outlines and finally ghostly shimmering shapes. Trees and undergrowth were now clearly visible.

"I think we can get going now." Pete got up and looked at the clock. "It's twelve midnight. My mother will rip my head off."

"With your unmistakable sense of direction, do you know which way to go?" Bob asked.

"Now, yes. Since the moon has risen in the east, the way should be there." The Second Investigator went ahead. In the moonlight, the forest seemed only half as threatening and

above all only half as big. A short time later they reached the path that led them back to the road.

“Thank goodness,” Pete sighed and looked up. “In the truest sense of the word. Without the moon, we’d have been in a real mess. Now let’s go home!”

The bicycles were still in their place. Bob and Pete got on the saddles and cycled as fast as they could back to Rocky Beach.

Many years ago, when the three friends were younger, Uncle Titus had given them the old mobile home trailer to use as a clubhouse, which eventually transformed into Headquarters. They had built several secret entrances into it, so that they could enter without anyone noticing.

One of these entrances was called Red Gate Rover, a carefully camouflaged door on one side of the fence of the salvage yard, which could be opened by a hidden trigger. Now, these entrances still exist but not used as frequently as the three have grown bigger and taller.

Headquarters itself has also been transformed over time and updated with new technical equipment and furniture. There is a small laboratory which they also use as a darkroom for processing photographs.

Pete and Bob stood close packed in the light of the red lamp next to Jupiter Jones, the First Investigator, who looked suspiciously at the newly developed photos. “The images of the comet are quite good,” he murmured. “But what’s this supposed to be?” Jupiter tapped on a photo in which a blurred patch of light could be seen against a black background.

“Did you take a picture of Pete dropping his bicycle lamp?” He grinned mockingly.

Bob bit his lips. “That’s the flying object,” he said meekly. “But I forgot to change the exposure time. The images have been exposed for too long, so the thing that flew back and forth can only be seen as a blurred patch.”

“So unfortunately these pictures are completely useless,” Pete stated and gave Jupiter a cautious look. “I have a hunch we’ll have a hard time convincing you without evidence.”

“I must admit, your story seems quite far-fetched,” Jupiter said.

“You weren’t there,” the Second Investigator defended himself. “Otherwise, you’d think differently.”

Jupiter nodded and looked up from the photos. “I would probably have a logical explanation for this incident.”

Bob, who was just about to hang up the photos to dry, paused. “Your overconfidence knows no bounds again, Jupiter Jones.”

“How so? Only logical conclusions lead me to believe that my presence would have made the matter appear much clearer. Firstly, six eyes see more than four, secondly it is known that you are often deceived by external appearances and rarely look behind the façade. Thirdly, I have proved often enough that my intellect is capable of astonishing achievements, especially in exceptional situations.” Jupiter didn’t try to make a face, but it was hard for him to stifle a grin.

“My goodness, Juve,” Pete moaned. “You need a proper intellectual damper again. How about a Grade ‘D’ on your next maths test? That would put you back on the carpet again.”

“Maybe. But that’s never gonna happen.” Now Juve grinned.

Pete sighed. “The worst part is that you’re probably right—with a Grade ‘D’ in maths, I mean. Of course not with other things. You would have been as helpless as we were if you’d seen the UFO.”

Bob flinched. When Jupiter said nothing, he looked up surprised. "You're not saying anything, Juve. I could have sworn you'd ridiculed Pete for the UFO. I already had your answer in my head: 'Your assumption that it was a UFO lacks any rational basis'."

"You got the tone perfectly, Bob," laughed Pete.

But Jupiter was not mocked. "Just make fun of me. If you would even think for a second, you would realize that it was actually a UFO. After all, the abbreviation UFO means nothing more than an 'Unidentified Flying Object'. And so we must, for the time being, name the apparition you have seen as a UFO, as it unidentified and it appeared as a flying object."

"Of course, this will change as soon as you get involved with the case," teased Pete. "What would you look like if you were as helpless as we are? After all, you are the First Investigator and you have a reputation to lose."

Jupiter nodded confidently. "Exactly. So I suggest we take a look around the site. Maybe we'll find a lead. Probably the whole experience you had would be very easy to explain."

"Of course. Then what are we waiting for?" Bob put his photographic equipment together and switched on the big light.

"Juve!" sounded an energetic voice from outside. "Are you in there?"

"Aunt Mathilda!" Pete moaned. "I hope she doesn't have work for us again."

The three left Headquarters and stepped out into the sunny salvage yard. Jupiter's aunt was waiting for them.

"There you are. And Bob and Pete too, that's a good thing. Uncle Titus needs your help. A customer bought all that stuff over there and wants it delivered to him. Can you help load the truck?"

Jupiter twisted his eyes, but he knew they couldn't get out of the work. They had made an agreement with Uncle Titus that they were allowed to keep items from the salvage yard for their headquarters and workshop if they gave him a hand now and then.

They got to work in a hurry.

"The most pleasing thing for me is that you can now still enjoy exploring this wonderful stretch of nature by bike," said Pete, turning his mountain bike down a gear as the road became a little steeper. He didn't mind the physical effort at all, unlike Jupiter, who saved the biting remark on his tongue.

"What is it, Juve? Don't you have enough puff for an answer?" Bob laughed. "One of those rare moments when our First Investigator is speechless. We should enjoy this, Pete."

"Just wait till we get there," Jupiter snapped back.

A few minutes later they reached the gravel field. The three of them parked their bicycles and headed to the edge of the forest. Involuntarily all three watched the sky.

"Funny," Pete murmured. "In daylight, everything looks so different here. It's not threatening anymore. When I look at the forest path and the trees, it seems to me that last night was just a dream."

Bob nodded. "I feel the same way. Our experiences yesterday seem completely absurd to me."

Jupiter smiled contentedly. "There you go. Now you admit yourself that your imagination may have played a trick on you. What would have been a harmless heavenly phenomenon during the day turned into a UFO in your heads in the darkness, and more so in the eerie atmosphere of a lonely parking lot at the edge of the forest."

Pete stopped and looked angrily at the First Investigator. "Now hold your breath, Juve! Most of the time I overlook your arrogance, but today you're going a little too far. You

weren't here last night, so save your comments until there's concrete evidence that we were wrong. Because right now you're acting very illogically. Your smug remarks are based on mere conjecture."

Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"One to nothing for Pete in this round of your never-ending battle of words," Bob remarked.

The First Investigator, who was reluctant to admit defeat in a discussion, wanted to start an answer, but Bob held him back. "Whatever else you want to exchange in terms of friendliness, I think there's time until we find what we're looking for."

"If we should find anything..." Jupiter mumbled as they entered the forest path.

"Strange..." Pete said after covering a short distance in silence. "The forest seems to have shrunk. Last night, the way to the fork seemed much longer to me. But it's up ahead!"

"Now we have to turn right," Bob said.

After a few hundred metres they left the path and fought their way through the undergrowth. The forest was not very large. Soon the trees retreated and in front of them lay a gently sloping, grassy valley. Carefully planted in rows, countless orange trees grew here, on which already small, green fruits hung. The trees stood close to each other and they almost touched at their widest points. Every few metres, paths ran straight through the valley and made the plantation look like an oversized chess board. On the other side of the small valley, about five hundred metres away, the forest began again, while the end of the plantation on its right side could not be seen. On the left there was a house nearby. Insects buzzed through the warm air.

"The blue glow must have come from here," Pete said and looked around helplessly. "It's hard to say, though, whether the source was right here in front or in the middle of this orange grove."

"Or over there by the house," Bob added.

"Let's take a look around," Jupiter suggested, "maybe we'll discover something."

Slowly, The Three Investigators walked along the grassy strip between the forest and the plantation. Two ruts in the grass showed that the road was occasionally used by vehicles. The three let their glances glide attentively along the path, but they discovered nothing unusual.

"Too bad we can't tell exactly where we saw the blue glow," Bob said. "Maybe we're going the wrong way right now."

"We should keep looking in this direction until we get to the end of the orange field, then we turn back," Jupiter suggested.

However, even on the last part of the way they didn't notice anything conspicuous. They were about to go back when Pete stopped abruptly and looked down into the valley. "There!" he shouted and pointed his finger at a building on the edge of the plantation.

The country house with a veranda and an annex was only separated from the orange trees by a meadow of about two hundred metres wide. A small vegetable garden adorned the somewhat run-down property. Right next to it stood a flat, elongated storage shed, probably for the harvested oranges. There was also a small stable.

The property was carefully fenced. A couple of chickens were running free pecking on the ground. A narrow dirt road led away from the house and out of the valley. There were two cars—a black Mercedes and a blue van.

On the meadow between the plantation and the property, colourful field flowers grew. But in the middle of the meadow there was a circular patch that was brown.

The circle had a diameter of about three metres and it looked as if a very large and heavy object had stood there recently. "What in heaven's name is that?" Bob asked.

4. The Circle

Bob also stared fascinated at the circular brown patch. "It looks as if..." he began, but broke off, as if he didn't dare to continue.

"As if what?" Jupiter followed it up vigorously.

"It's all right," Bob tried to distract him.

But the First Investigator did not let up. "As if what? As if a UFO had landed there? Admit it, it was the first thing on your mind. Both of you."

"So what?" Pete defended himself and Bob. "It really looks like it!"

"But it could be something completely different," Jupiter disagreed. "Perhaps the resident of this house recently celebrated a party and set up a small tent on the meadow for this purpose, and it stood there for a few days. After it is removed, the lawn would look like that."

Pete raised a doubting eyebrow. "A tent? So small and absolutely circular? And the lawn around it is completely undamaged?"

Jupiter twisted his eyes. "Maybe it wasn't a tent, maybe it was something else. It was just a hunch."

"A very shaky hunch."

"No shakier than yours."

Bob sighed. "How about we just take a close look at this thing? After that, you can continue to argue." Without waiting for an answer, he walked past the two and followed the gentle slope that led past the orange grove to the house.

The circle was accurate from close up and completely round. "Look at that," Bob said. "The boundary is as if it was drawn with a compass. Here the blades of grass are still green and upright and here they are bent and discoloured."

"Really discoloured?" Pete asked. "I think they look more burned to me—like from a huge campfire."

"Anyway, the whole thing is far too clean and exact to be made by a tent," Bob said. "So the garden party theory is out of the question. What is it, Juve? You're not saying anything. Are you speechless?"

Jupiter looked closely at the form in the lawn and pinched his lower lip absent-mindedly with thumb and index finger. Then he squatted at the edge of the circle and stroked the crushed grass with his flat hand. "Big and heavy," he murmured. "Something big and heavy must have stood here. Maybe an agricultural machine."

"... Of these proportions?" Pete doubted.

"An orange press," Jupiter continued unflinchingly. "Tons and tons of oranges dumped into a giant tub and freshly squeezed juice comes out the bottom."

Pete looked up surprised. "Is there such a thing?"

The First Investigator grinned. "I don't know. That's all I could think of."

Suddenly they heard a door creaking and turned their heads towards the house. A man in tattered clothes, with a short grey beard and tangled hair stood at the entrance and stared darkly at them. Jupiter rose. But before he could greet the man, he went down the three steps to the garden and approached them with quick, energetic steps. In one hand he held a big rifle. "What are you doing here?" he yelled.

“We... uh... took a walk and...”

“Get off my property!”

“Excuse me, sir,” Jupiter began. “We certainly didn’t want to bother you, but there was no fence.”

In the meantime the man had reached the garden gate, where he clung to with one hand while the other threatened to lift the rifle. “The whole valley is mine. If you’re gonna steal my oranges, you’re too early. They won’t be ripe for a few weeks.” He gave out a moaning laugh.

“Certainly not, sir,” Bob tried to placate the man. “We would have gone on immediately, but then we discovered this strange thing here.” He pointed to the circle. “What’s that?”

“That’s none of your business,” the man exclaimed. “Now get out of here!”

Jupiter wanted to turn away, but Pete was not ready to give up. “We were here last night and watched the comet. We noticed a strange light coming from your plantation. Do you know what that was?”

For a moment, the grim look of the man changed. He opened his eyes and seemed helpless to look for an answer. But then he answered briefly: “There was nothing. Get out of here, or else...” He took the rifle in both hands and aimed at the three.

Bob raised his arms defensively. “We’re leaving. Sorry to bother you.” He turned around and slowly went back to the slope leading up to the forest. Pete followed him. Only Jupiter stopped for a moment and looked over to the house. The man stared at them in the dark.

“What is it, Juve? Are you coming?” Pete shouted.

The First Investigator broke loose and hurried to catch up with his friends. As they walked up the slope, the three of them looked around again. The man stopped at his garden fence and watched them suspiciously until they reached the edge of the forest and disappeared between the trees.

“I’ve rarely seen such an unfriendly person,” Pete remarked. “To act like that, as if we wanted to steal his unripe oranges.”

“He wasn’t interested in his valuable fruits. He had something to hide,” Bob thought. “Have you noticed how he clung to the garden gate? And then there’s the rifle in his hand! He wanted to prevent us from getting too close to the garden and the house.”

“Besides, he avoided Bob’s question about the strange circle in the grass,” the Second Investigator said. “And he was not even particularly adept at it. Did you noticed how strange he reacted when I mentioned the mysterious light?”

Bob nodded. “Was it wise to tell him about it? I would have kept my mouth shut.”

“Why? We had nothing to lose. He would have chased us off his property anyway.” He turned to Jupiter. “What about you, Juve? You haven’t said anything. That’s pretty rare with you.”

The First Investigator shook his head. “I noticed something else. As I looked over at the house, I noticed a man watching us from a window on the ground floor. I could only see him for a moment before he noticed that I saw him and he withdrew. But his face looked kind of familiar to me. I’m afraid I cannot remember from where.”

“What did he look like?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Somehow... meaningless. He had a common face. Like a newscaster. Nevertheless, I feel as if I have seen him before.”

They reached the forest road and soon afterwards, the parking lot.

“What do we do now?” Pete wanted to know when they unlocked their bikes.

“We’ll go home and get something to eat,” Jupiter replied.

“Shall we let the case go?”

“Case?” Jupiter gave him a critical look. “We have a flattened spot in the grass, probably covered by an orange press, and a peculiar plantation owner. I don’t see any case.”

“You forgot about the UFO and the strange blue light,” Pete reminded. “Two unexplained apparitions that should interest you.”

“I’m surprised that you of all people are so eager to find out more,” Jupiter quipped.

“I’m surprised you’re not,” Pete hit back. “Since when does a secret leave you cold?”

“I see no secret,” Jupe replied coolly.

“And I don’t want you to make me look like an idiot just because I saw something you don’t want to believe,” Pete continued.

Jupiter sighed. “All right. I admit that I am not completely uninterested in this story either. I’m just a little more sceptical.”

“Because you weren’t there,” Pete interjected.

“Possibly. But that’s why I’m the only one who can stay objective. And at the moment I unfortunately have to confess that I don’t know what to look for and under what pretext we could look around the plantation again. But this is not least because my stomach is much too empty to supply my brain with enough energy. So let’s go home for lunch!”

The door to Headquarters was ripped open and Pete stormed in. He looked around in a hurry. “Please, tell me it’s here, Jupe! My wallet!”

Jupiter looked up from the computer monitor in surprise. In the afternoon he had fled to Headquarters to be safe from Aunt Mathilda and her work orders, and now he had been sitting here for several hours playing chess against the computer. After winning two games, he had ventured to the next level of difficulty and his chances were good to set a new personal record. “Was your wallet supposed to be here?”

“I can’t find it!” Pete replied. “Cash, student ID, library card and last but not least my membership card for the swimming pool—everything is gone! I’ve already turned my whole room upside down and searched through all my clothes. Please, tell me you’ve seen it somewhere here!”

Jupe shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see your wallet.” Bored, he turned back to the computer.

Pete ran hectically up and down the trailer and looked into every corner. Then he started lifting up all the stacks of paper, leafing through magazines and digging around on the desk.

“Pete!” Jupe moaned. “I must concentrate!”

“I need to find my wallet again. Everything’s in there!”

“I’m about to defeat Chandra for the third time in a row!”

“Defeat Chandra? The comet? What are you even talking about? Get up! You’re probably sitting on it.”

The First Investigator twisted his eyes. “Not the comet. The computer. The chess program is called Chandra. And I’m definitely not sitting on your stupid wallet.”

“Why is the program called the same as the comet?” Pete asked absent-mindedly and examined the small hanging cupboard above the sink.

“Coincidence,” Jupiter replied curtly. “Pete, would you please quiet down? You’re getting on my nerves! And I’m sure your wallet didn’t hide behind the saucers!”

Pete didn’t answer, but continued his search hectically and unmindfully.

Jupe was thinking hard about his next move when Pete yelled, “Ha!” The First Investigator flinched. “Now I know where it is! I left it in the darkroom this morning!”

With three long steps he was at the door of their small laboratory.

“Stop, Pete! I’d rather not...” Jupiter exclaimed, but it was already too late. Pete opened the door and looked into Bob’s horrified face.

“Pete!” Bob yelled. “You idiot! How many times do I have to tell you that you always knock before you enter a darkroom?”

The Second Investigator raised his hands defensively. “Sorry! I had no idea you were developing photos here.”

“Exactly! That’s why I want you to knock!” Angrily, he threw the piece of photo paper he had just been holding in the developer liquid tub. The paper slowly turned black. “That’s great, Pete. Fortunately, I still have a few more sheets of photo paper.” He swept some sheets off the table. “But next time you go to the photo shop and buy it! Then you know how expensive this thing is!”

“I apologized, what else can I say?” Pete said. “Why are you hanging around the lab again? You just developed photos this morning.”

“I wanted to enlarge yesterday’s footage. But thanks to you barging in, I have to start over again.”

Pete sighed. “Don’t get upset, I’ll buy new photo paper tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” Bob replied grimly.

“Then the day after tomorrow. Have you seen my wallet?”

“Why do I care about your stupid wallet?”

“So you haven’t seen it?”

“No.”

“Damn!” yelled Juve. Pete and Bob turned to him, frightened. “I’ll be dead in four moves!” He stared at them in a rage. “All because of you! Your argument has completely irritated me! No one can concentrate on that. You and your stupid wallet, Pete!”

“My goodness, if only I hadn’t come here!” he moaned. “If I’d at least found my stupid wallet. It’s not here either. I must have lost it on the way this afternoon. Probably when I bent over at the circle!”

All of a sudden Jupiter calmed down and a smile scurried over his face. “If so, Pete, I might forgive your occasional annoying behaviour. So we have a good reason to return to the orange plantation again.”

Pete crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Oh! Suddenly you have rekindled your interest in the circle.”

The First Investigator grinned embarrassedly. “All right, I admit it. Actually, I’m a little interested in your UFO story.”

“You just wouldn’t admit it because it annoyed you that you weren’t there yourself, right?” Bob suspected.

“If you want to make it sound so drastic...”

Bob closed the lab door. His anger had suddenly vanished. “What are we waiting for?”

5. Shots in the Night

It was getting dark when they reached the edge of the forest and looked out over the valley covered with orange trees. The sun had already set and the colour of the sky changed from a bright green-yellow in the west to a deep night blue in the east, where the first bright stars were sparkling. The house could only be seen as a dark shadow in the valley, and there were no lights at any of the windows.

"It's not bad that it's so dark already," Jupiter said. "Then, we can't be seen so quickly so we might have the opportunity to observe something interesting again."

"You mean the UFO?" Pete asked.

"Or other exciting things," Jupiter said.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone there," Bob remarked. "The two cars that were still parked there today at noon are gone, too."

"Then let's go," Pete said. "I want to find my wallet without being threatened with a rifle. I have little desire to wander again in the middle of the night through a pitch-dark forest. Besides, I had to promise my mother I'd be home early today. I can't afford another crisis like yesterday. Let's go back while it's still a little bright."

"Agreed," Bob said.

They walked slowly down the hill to the house, their eyes on the ground, because Pete suspected that he had lost his wallet in the open. But they found nothing. Finally they reached the meadow that separated the house from the orange grove. Everything remained quiet on the property, so that they could once again see the circular patch in the grass.

"That's a strange thing," Jupe murmured.

"I'll take some photos," said Bob, who had taken his camera with him. "Hopefully the guy's not around somewhere seeing the flash. Then he'll be back with his rifle for sure."

"The car's gone, remember?" Jupiter reminded him. "If he comes back, we'll notice him before he sees us. Then we can still leave."

Bob went round the circular patch and pressed the trigger several times while Pete desperately searched the ground for his wallet.

"Damn!" he cursed. "I guess I can forget my wallet. And I was so sure I lost it here!"

"Maybe Mr Rifle found it," Jupiter surmised.

"Then I can write it off," Pete said. "As unfriendly as he was, I wouldn't expect him to contact me. Too bad he's not here now, or I could ask him."

"Be glad he's not here," Bob said.

"Do you think we should take a little look around here? We could walk around the fenced property or maybe take a quick look at the barn," Jupiter suggested.

Pete looked sceptically at the sky. "What's the point? It's getting dark faster than I thought. We'd better go."

The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe we'll find more circles. Or something else."

Bob lit the flash one last time, then lowered the camera and shook his head. "It's amazing. Just a few hours ago, you were so sceptical that you didn't even want to come here. And now you can't tear yourself away."

“That’s easy to explain, Bob. Earlier, I had only your vague descriptions. But this morning, I saw this strange circle in the grass.”

“Which, in your opinion, comes from an orange press,” Pete added.

“... Which is primarily a mystery,” Jupe defended himself. “And even though it may be harmless, I want to solve it. The point is it’s right in front of me now.” Suddenly Jupiter’s gaze slid past Bob to the plantation and his eyes widened. “I have something else on my mind!” he whispered.

Bob and Pete turned around. The sky in the east was now night black, the orange trees stood out only weakly from it.

Suddenly, a bright blue disc floated above the trees somewhere at the other end of the valley.

“There it is! Jupe!” Pete shouted. “Exactly the same thing as last night!”

Jupiter was speechless for a moment, then he shouted: “Quick, Bob, take photos! Come on, before it’s gone!”

“Yes! Yes! immediately,” Bob stuttered and fumbled around the camera without turning his gaze away from the floating object. It stood quietly in the air, only a slight tremor was felt. Just as Bob was about to press the shutter button, he remembered his mistake from last night and quickly controlled the exposure time. Then he pulled the trigger and the lightning tore the darkness apart for a moment. A second later, the camera buzzed.

“Damn! No more film!” Bob cried. “This can’t be happening!”

“What... is... that?” whispered Jupiter, who hadn’t noticed Bob’s curse and was still staring spellbound at the floating object.

“There!” Pete shouted excitedly. “Now it’s moving! It flies to the left and right and stops again! That’s what it did yesterday!” The illuminated object floated slowly downwards and disappeared a moment later behind the orange plantation.

“It’s landing! It’s landing!” shouted Jupiter. “Come on, let’s go!” Faster than Pete and Bob ever thought possible, the First Investigator ran off. Even before they had caught up with him, he had already disappeared between the orange trees.

When Pete ran into the grove, he was greeted by the deepest darkness. The little twilight light that had illuminated the meadow was completely swallowed by the densely packed tree tops. “Jupe!” he shouted. “Where are you? I can’t see!”

A few metres in front of him something lit up. A narrow beam of light trembled through the darkness. “I have a flashlight with me,” Jupiter gasped. “Come on! I need to see this thing up close!”

Bob and Pete followed the dancing light that showed Jupiter a way through the labyrinth of trees and saved him from running into an obstacle. Again and again they looked up as they walked through the grove, but the dense canopy of leaves blocked their view of the sky.

“We have to... climb the slope... to the footpath,” Bob groaned. “We can see better there!”

Jupiter swung immediately to the right and they ran diagonally out of the valley. But soon the First Investigator slowed down and finally stopped. “Too steep!” he moaned. “I can’t go on!”

“Come on, Jupe,” urged Pete, whose reserves of strength were far from exhausted, and pushed the First Investigator forward by the shoulder. “Otherwise it’ll be gone!”

Jupiter pulled himself together and ran again a few metres before he finally gave up. “No more... running! Hurry... you go ahead... okay?” They climbed the slope, which was particularly steep for Jupiter. Finally, they reached the narrow path between the plantation and the forest.

“How long is this valley?” Bob gasped. “We should be at the other end soon!”

They stared forwards, but in the darkness the boundary of the orange plantation could not be seen. In the distance, a blue glimmer appeared just above the ground, which quickly became lighter.

“There it is! It’s coming at us,” Pete cried.

They stopped abruptly. No one dared to go any further. “What do we do now?” Bob asked rushed. “If this is actually a UFO, then...”

“We’d better get out of here!” Pete cut him off was about to flee into the forest, but Jupe held him back by his arm.

“That’s not the UFO,” he said, still out of breath. “This light has a very earthly origin.”

Now the other two also recognized it—two separate light sources emerged from the dim light.

“A car!” Pete exclaimed. Two more lights appeared behind the two headlights.

“Two cars,” Bob corrected.

The vehicles were fast approaching. “Did they see that thing too? What are we going to do about it? Are we staying here?” Pete asked nervously, “What if they have something to do with the UFO? What...”

“My goodness, Pete!” Jupiter shouted. “Keep your nerve! You’re driving me crazy! Let’s step aside and see what happens. Maybe they’ll just drive past us.”

The vehicles were difficult to see in the glaring headlights, but the rear vehicle was clearly a van. At first it looked as if they were going on. But suddenly the first car stopped with the engine running a few metres in front of the three detectives.

For seconds, the headlights stared at them coldly. Jupiter wanted to go towards it when the driver’s door opened and a man in a black coat and a black hat got out. He stood at the car door and stared silently at them. Nothing moved in the van behind it.

The three tried to see more, but the light dazzled too much. The figure still didn’t move. Only the running engines could be heard.

“Good evening, sir,” Jupiter began carefully. “We...”

The man reached into his coat and pulled something out, which he stretched forward with both hands. “Go away!” his deep voice roared over the sound of the engine.

“Jupe! He’s got a gun,” Pete cried.

A flash and a deafening bang tore through the air. At the same moment, someone pushed Jupiter aside. He startled and was about to defend himself against the supposed attacker when he realized that it was Pete who had taken him out of the line of fire.

“Get out of here!” called the Second Investigator and dragged him into the forest.

Another shot sounded. Jupiter ran off. Branches hit him in the face and scratched his arms, but he didn’t feel it at all. Only when the three detectives reached the forest road, they stopped exhausted and looked around.

“Will he follow us?” Pete asked in a trembling voice.

“I don’t know,” Jupiter gasped. His lungs ached.

“We have to... get to the bikes! And then let’s get out of here.”

“For once, I agree with you,” Jupiter said.

They didn’t say a word until they reached the parking lot. Time and again they glanced over their shoulder.

“He’s not following us,” Bob noted with relief. “What’s all this about? Who’s that? And why did he shoot us?”

“I’m sure it’s not the plantation owner,” Pete said. “He had a different voice. But I think the second vehicle was his van.”

“I don’t care. I want to go home right now,” Bob said. “I’ve had enough for today.”
No one disagreed.

6. On the Internet

“This can’t be happening, damn it!” Bob dropped onto the small stool in the darkroom and angrily crossed his arms. “Why must it always happen this way?”

There was a knock on the door. “Bob? May we come in?” It was Jupe.

He took a look at the work table. No photo paper was lying open. “Yes.”

Jupiter opened the lab door and he and Pete peered in.

“What is it?” the First Investigator wanted to know.

“Do you remember that the film was rewound after I photographed the UFO? Check this out—the thing’s only on a third of it because the film was ending.” He pointed to the negative strip.

“Oh, no,” Pete moaned. “Did the photos of the circle come out?”

“The negative for the earlier shots are okay. I’ll make some prints of them,” Bob replied dejectedly. He closed the darkroom door and started preparing for the development.

“Maybe it’s just as well,” Pete remarked. “The fact that the film was not enough seems to be a sign. We’re supposed to stay out of this.” He gave his colleagues insecure looks as he suspected that his proposal would meet with little approval.

“Stay out of it?” Jupiter exclaimed promptly, outraged. “We were shot at yesterday! And that’s what we’re supposed to stay out of?”

“Yes! I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night because I was so scared!” Pete shouted back. “But of course, you don’t care. You want to risk your neck again just to find out what the whole thing was about?”

Jupiter sighed. “Calm down, Pete. I don’t feel any different. Do you think I slept well? But that’s exactly why I need to find out what mystery we stepped into. Otherwise I will have sleepless nights in the future.”

Pete replied angrily. “Leave me out of this! I’m not setting foot in that Orange Valley anymore. If you’re dying to risk your life, have fun, but without me!”

The First Investigator twisted his eyes. “Who’s talking about risking your life? Believe me, nothing will pull me back to the plantation for now. I had something completely different in mind. We should find out if anyone else has seen the UFO. Maybe we’ll proceed that way.”

“And how are you gonna do that? Are you planning to put an ad in the paper? Who saw a UFO over the Santa Monica Mountains? Please report to The Three Investigators. Or do you want to use the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup? People will think we’re stupid when we ask them about UFOs.”

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup was a method The Three Investigators used very successfully to contact thousands of people to find out something they wanted to know. It worked in such a way that all three called their friends and told them what they wanted to know. These friends then called other people and they in turn, called more people so that the message or question was spread very quickly across the city.

Jupe shook his head. “I was thinking of another approach. There are even more ways to get in touch with many people—the Internet.”

“Aha. And what am I supposed to do with that approach? You know I don’t know anything about computers.”

“The Internet is a worldwide computer network that you can search for just about anything you want to know. From stock market reports to scientific discoveries to fan clubs of youth book series, almost everything can be found,” Jupiter explained. “And since I bought a modem a few weeks ago, I’ve been surfing the Internet a few times. Did you know, for example, that there is even a Rocky Beach website?”

“No. I’m not interested that either,” Pete said. “What do you want to achieve on the Internet?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “I could well imagine that there’s a website somewhere about UFO sightings. If anyone has noticed anything that has happened in the last two days, we should be able to find out.”

Bob had listened to the discussion silently from the darkroom, while he developed the pictures. He swivelled the photo papers with tongs in the developer tub and the white surface quickly became dark. He dipped each photo papers into the stop bath and then into the fixer. Finally he washed the photos in clean water and hung it up to dry.

Bob opened the darkroom door and said: “Come in here and look at these prints.” He pointed to the photos he had hung from a line stretched under the ceiling to dry. On one it was easy to see the strange circle in the lawn. On another was a brightly shining semicircle peeled out of the darkness at the edge of the photo.

“Great photos, huh?” Bob said. “Will these photos help us?”

Jupiter looked at them critically. “Maybe. But so far I don’t know what to do with it.”

“Impressive,” Pete murmured discontentedly. “Looks like you photographed part of a light bulb.”

Bob shook his head. “It’s really hard to believe. There I get two chances to photograph a UFO and both times I messed it up. I wonder if we’ll see that thing again.”

“Before we go on another UFO hunt, we should see if anyone else has seen the apparition,” Jupiter said. “I’d better get right on the computer.”

Bob poured the chemicals back into the canisters and turned on the lights. Then he left the darkroom.

Jupiter got the computer ready and entered the keyword ‘UFO’ into the search program. “My goodness, look at this! There are over five hundred entries!”

“Five hundred?” Pete moved a little closer to the screen to check the number. “We can’t possibly go through all of them!”

“We should narrow the search criteria. Why don’t you add Rocky Beach or Los Angeles? That should limit the choice considerably,” Bob suggested.

Jupiter tried their home town, but this time the computer didn’t give out a single entry. So he entered the keyword ‘Los Angeles’ and they found what they were looking for. There was one entry that dealt exclusively with sightings of extraordinary celestial phenomena in the greater Los Angeles area. He clicked on that website and scanned through the table of contents.

“Of course, there’s a lot to read about the comet,” the First Investigator said. “But here’s something about UFOs. Let’s see if our UFO is there.” He clicked on the keyword and a list of UFO sightings of the last forty years appeared on the monitor. It were a few hundred. “My goodness!” Jupiter gasped.

“Our experience doesn’t seem half as extraordinary as we thought.” Pete frowned. “If these reports are to be believed, the sky would have to be full of flying saucers.”

Bob shook his head. "Look at these reports—although all alleged sightings are listed, a natural explanation for the phenomenon follows almost every case. Here it was a weather balloon, there a plane. And here," he laughed, "someone thought the skylight that a disco had used for advertising was a UFO."

"I once read an article that states that over ninety percent of all encounters with flying saucers could be explained in a natural way. Almost all the remaining sightings turned out to be hoaxes—for example, some people tied a hub cap to a nylon thread, hung it from a tree, photographed the whole thing and claimed it was an alien spaceship. Only one percent of all incidents have not yet been resolved. If we apply that to these reports, only a handful of them should be worth considering."

"The reports are ordered by date," remarked Jupiter. "I'll see if anything special has happened in the last few days." He dragged the scroll bar down with the mouse until he reached the last entries. "Hmm. The last report is already three weeks old and the alleged UFO was a Frisbee."

"We're not getting anywhere with this," Bob said dryly.

"Wait," Jupiter disagreed. "There's more to this site than the reports. Let's take a look at the comments corner." He clicked on another field and a long list of comments on various reports and discussion topics appeared. The date was indicated before each comment and it turned out that more than a dozen people a day had something to say. Jupiter scanned through the comments of the last few days.

"I can see some comments mentioning Chandra 7," Pete said shaking his head as saw some of the entries. "Here, look! Someone is claiming that the comet is a camouflaged spaceship from which aliens are observing Earth. That's completely absurd!"

"There seems to be a lot of weirdos who actually believe that," Jupiter remarked.

Bob laughed. "This reminds me of an old case of ours—Mrs Barron—from *The Mystery of the Blazing Cliffs*. Do you remember the ranch owner's crazy wife who belonged to the Blue Star Mission? She was firmly convinced that extraterrestrial beings would pick her up and some other chosen ones when the end of the world was near?

Pete's mouth turned to a broad grin. "I'll never forget that."

Jupiter added: "Yes, she was a follower of this Vladimir Contreras, who wrote the book *They Walk Among Us*. It was about rescuers from the planet Omega and she actually believed that those beings had been keeping watch over us. She didn't care that Omega was not a planet, but a nebula in the constellation Sagittarius.

"Did I actually tell you that Vladimir Contreras was in Rocky Beach recently? He had a reading at the city library. There was a short article in the paper about him, with a photo. His bestseller successes seem to belong to the past, otherwise he wouldn't visit an insignificant small town like Rocky Beach. The good Mrs Barron must have been to the reading, too."

He tapped the screen. "And here she would be in the best of company. Maybe we should give her a hint that she can find a lot of like-minded people on the Internet."

"A lot of like-minded crazy people, if you ask me," Pete replied and pointed to another entry.

"Here someone claims to fly across space night after night with a couple of aliens. They beam him out of bed and take him on a trip across the galaxy. Tell me, are there normal people who deal with such things? Or is it possible to label all of them crazy from the outset? I mean, are we crazy just because we've seen something we can't explain?"

"Good question." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "We could leave a message here that for the last two nights we saw a bright blue disc in the sky above the Santa Monica Mountains. But what would you think if you read something like this?"

Pete sighed and lowered his shoulders. "I'd think the writer of the message was a nut like anybody else who claims to have had contact with aliens."

Bob thoughtfully leaned his chin on his hand and stared at the monitor. "We have a problem. We have seen something that we would not believe if someone else had told us about it. How are we supposed to get on with this sceptical attitude?"

"I'm not ready to believe all this crap standing here," said the Second Investigator. "Maybe all this stuff on the Internet is not going to help us. This is not a serious source of information, but rather a playground for people who have nothing better to do than stare at the stars at night and make up tales. You might as well turn it off, Jupe. It's no use."

"Wait a minute. I'm just reading the last..." Jupe said suddenly. "Hey, what's this?"

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"Look at this one!" Jupiter pointed to an entry on the screen. They read the message by someone named 'Cosma' that was posted a few hours ago: 'Who saw anything unusual in the mountains north of Rocky Beach on Friday and Saturday night?'

7. Cosma

“I really earned that ice cream!” Jupiter gasped as he got off his bike. “The heat is intolerable today!”

“We’re not here for pleasure, chubby, don’t forget that!” Pete admonished him with a grin. “And if you order a giant sundae now, you’ll double and triple the few grams you’ve just lost.”

“I don’t care,” Jupe buzzed. “I’m hungry now. I’m getting on my nerves with these eternal diets. They’re no good anyway.”

“If you’re gonna spike them with giant ice bombs, of course, they won’t do anything good.” Pete snapped.

“What about you? Aren’t you going to order some ice cream?” Jupiter asked aggressively.

“Of course I will. I can afford it.” Pete hit his flat stomach with his hand, saying a lot.

But the First Investigator did not let himself be disturbed. He smiled confidently. “Me too. After all, not everyone can be a herring like you.”

Bob moaned. “Are you ready? Or do I have to prepare myself for a longer confrontation? Anyway, I’ll get going.” He locked his bike to a lamp post and slowly strolled along the beach promenade.

The Three Investigators had responded to the mysterious message on the Internet and suggested to meet up with Cosma, the sender, because they did not want to discuss the matter online. That same afternoon Cosma had replied and named a meeting point—an ice cream parlour on the coast of Santa Monica.

The promenade was full of people with rollerblades and skateboards. Those who were on foot attracted attention with either very unusual or very scarce clothing. One thing seemed to be most important here—to see and be seen. Also the people who sat at the round tables in front of the ice cream parlour were obviously more interested in the visitors of the promenade than in their ice cream.

The three ‘sitters’ sat down at a small table and looked out to the Pacific Ocean. The sun was already low in the sky. Jupiter looked at his watch. “We’re here five minutes early,” he said. “That’s what I told you, Pete, but you had to pedal like a lunatic.”

The Second Investigator grinned. “Just to spite you, Jupe, you know that.”

“Maybe Cosma’s here already,” Bob thought, looking around inconspicuously. “Too bad we don’t even know what she looks like. But she said stiffly and firmly that we would recognize her. Or she’d recognize us.” A young waiter came and took their order and they each chose a large sundae.

“I’m curious if we’re really going to learn anything interesting,” Jupiter murmured.

“So am I,” someone said behind them. The Three Investigators turned around and saw that a young woman had approached the table.

She was small and quite plump and had shoulder-length black hair, with a few dark red strands sticking out. Her round face glowed with light blue eyes, which did not fit her dark hair. Jupiter estimated that she was in her mid-twenties.

The First Investigator rose. “Cosma?”

The young woman smiled. "Exactly. I told you we'd recognize each other." She shook his hand.

"I am Jupiter Jones. And this is Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. Why don't you join us?"

Cosma stole a chair from the next table and sat down with The Three Investigators.

"How did you recognize us?" Pete wanted to know.

Cosma laughed. "That wasn't too hard. I knew I had to look out for three young men. And the three of you don't look like you spend much time here at the promenade. You don't wear rollerblades and you don't show off your tanned bodies. That's what sets you apart from everyone else here. And me too, by the way." She looked down at herself as if she wanted to confirm to herself that she didn't fit on this beach any more than the three detectives did.

Jupiter noticed her black T-shirt depicted a typical image of an alien as he knew from movies and magazines—a grey, bald head with big black eyes, a small nose and a tiny mouth. Below it are the words 'The Government is Lying!'

"Nice T-shirt, isn't it?" Cosma caught Jupiter reading it. "Which brings us right to the point—what is this story you didn't want to tell me by e-mail?"

The three of them looked at each other uncertainly. Bob finally spoke: "Perhaps you could start by telling us what your question meant on the website? Maybe then we can share information."

Cosma sighed. At that moment the ice cream came and gave her a moment to think. She ordered an iced tea and when the waiter had gone, she replied: "All right. Of course, we can beat around the bush, but that wouldn't help anybody. Since my question turned up on the website where everything is about unusual phenomena, it should be clear what it is about. In the last two nights a UFO has been sighted over the Santa Monica Mountains. And I want to find out if anyone else has seen it."

The Three Investigators had hoped to find answers, but this openness surprised them. Jupiter was the first to respond: "What exactly did you see?"

"Me? Nothing. Someone who wants to remain anonymous approached me via the website. I'm sort of an institution in Los Angeles. If you want to know something about UFOs and aliens—ask Cosma. Since I have this network, many people turn to me when they think they see UFOs. Most of the time they are just crazy people, but there are also cases where it is worth following them up. And this is one such case." She gave the three a challenging look. "And now it's your turn."

Pete and Bob decided by glances that Juve should tell the story. He was the most skilled when it came to saying as little as necessary to getting as much as possible.

"We saw a glowing disc in the sky last night," Jupiter said curtly. "That's all, actually. We were hoping you could tell us more."

Cosma lowered her head so that the bright red strand of hair fell into her face and looked at Jupiter conspiratorially. "That's the whole story? To tell me this one sentence, did you have to meet with me in person? What did you really see?"

"Nothing that matters."

"I don't believe that you are telling me everything."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Maybe we will remember more when you tell us what the person who contacted you experienced."

Cosma shook her head firmly. "I promised not to say anything else until I know I could trust you. And since you are so vague, the trust is not very great yet."

Pete didn't think it was fair of Jupiter to fob her off with such a pitiful way. "We've seen this thing twice," he started, getting a scowl from Jupiter. But he was not to be put off. "And

we tried to photograph it. We also saw a bright light at the edge of the forest and two shadowy figures.”

Cosma raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Not so fast,” she asked. “Tell me everything from the beginning.”

Pete continued to ignore Jupiter’s venomous glances and gave Cosma a detailed account of what had happened in the last two nights—from the accidental discovery of the glowing object to the uncanny encounter in the forest, the strange circle in the grass and the unfriendly plantation owner to the last night when the three sighted the flying disc again. That’s where Cosma interrupted him.

“That’s incredible!” she cried. “And you actually photographed the UFO? Did you bring the photos?”

Pete gave Jupiter a look. The First Investigator twisted his eyes. “All right. Now you know almost everything anyway. Then you can see the photos too.” He gave it to Cosma, who looked at it closely.

“There’s not much to see,” she said. “But your story is amazing enough without photographic evidence. And most importantly, it coincides with the other experience I know. Now I can tell you—the person who contacted me saw the UFO the night before last. She lived near the orange grove and observed a light blue light floating in the air and zigzagging. But this person doesn’t want to sound the alarm, because she is afraid of being declared crazy. She turned to me in the hope of finding someone who had seen the object.”

“Our story isn’t over yet,” Pete continued. “The best is yet to come. We ran to the place where we suspected the UFO to be. Suddenly a light came towards us. We thought it was a flying saucer at first, but it was two cars. They came closer and stopped right in front of us. The headlights were blinding, so we couldn’t see much. Then the door of the front car opened and a man got out. He was dressed all in black—black suit, black coat, black hat. And suddenly he pulled out a gun and shouted that we should go. I thought it was an empty threat, but the guy actually pulled the trigger and shot at us! We ran into the woods, of course. Luckily, he didn’t follow us. My goodness, I was scared!”

Cosma, who had just wanted to drink a sip of iced tea, lowered the glass in slow motion. She almost missed the table when she put it down. She stared at Pete with her eyes wide open.

“Unbelievable, huh?” Pete added a little embarrassed. He had obviously achieved more effect than intended with his story.

But Cosma reacted differently than expected. “This man was really dressed all in black? Couldn’t it have been a dark blue coat?”

The Second Investigator frowned. “Possible, yes, does it matter?”

“It matters, believe me!”

Bob and Jupiter also looked at her blankly. Finally Bob said: “Of course it could have been a dark blue coat, although I’m pretty sure it was black despite the darkness. But why is that important?”

Cosma took a deep breath once. “If the man with the gun was really dressed all in black, it’ll be dangerous. Much more dangerous than you can even imagine.”

8. The Men in Black

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Jupiter, who had been very reticent so far. “What’s with the black clothes?”

“The men in black,” Cosma began and took a meaningful break. It seemed like she couldn’t bring herself to reveal a secret to the three of them. But finally she sighed and went on:

“That’s a long story. But if you’ve actually met one of these men, it’s probably better if you know. There are many rumours about the men in black.

“No one knows who they are or where they come from. But the fact is that they appear when a UFO has been spotted or someone claims to have had contact with extraterrestrials. Mysteriously, they seem to know when to appear. They come out of nowhere and disappear back into nowhere.”

“And what do they do?” Pete asked.

“They threaten the people who have had contact with the unknown. People are being forced to remain silent about the incident. If there is evidence—photos or video recordings—it will be confiscated. And sometimes witnesses just disappear and never show up again. The men in black do everything they can to ensure that nothing of what has happened is made public, even though it could be mere speculation. They are keeping it a big secret.”

Jupiter felt uncomfortable. A look at Pete and Bob confirmed to him that his friends felt no different. The First Investigator called himself inwardly to order and said: “Nevertheless, in some cases they have not succeeded. Otherwise no one would know that these men in black even exist.”

Cosma nodded. “There are occasional people who report visits by men in black shortly after they have had an encounter of the first, second or third kind.”

Pete frowned. “What kind of encounter?”

“An encounter of the first kind is the sighting of a UFO,” Cosma explained. “An encounter of the second kind is a landing. Finally, the third kind involves contact with an extraterrestrial life form.

“The men in black will somehow hear about it. And one thing is certain—even if no one knows who these men are, what exactly they are up to and where they come from, it is certain that they exist. Everyone always tells the same story—strange men have appeared, threatened them and taken away all the evidences. These people always wore black suits, coats and hats. It’s certainly not a fairy tale.”

“What do you know about these men?” Bob asked.

“Many believe the men in black work for the US government that wants to cover up the fact that it has long known about contacts with extraterrestrial beings. Others believe that they may be from some kind of secret society that is connected to the extraterrestrials or one that has a need to preserve some secret knowledge. There are even people who are convinced that the men in black are extraterrestrial beings themselves, disguising themselves as humans to keep their existence secret.”

Pete leaned back. “Oh, my goodness!” he moaned. “This all sounds pretty creepy. Who do you think these men are? aliens?”

Cosma shrugged. "Anything is possible. I can well imagine they're working on behalf of the US Secret Service. After all, there are several indications that the government is covering up UFO incidents and that the people at the top know more than we all suspect. Roswell comes to mind."

Pete frowned. "Roswell? What's that again?"

"Have you ever heard of the Roswell incident?" Cosma asked.

The three of them shook their heads at the same time.

"Well, probably you've never actually dealt with such issues before, have you?"

"In fact, once," Jupiter said recalling the case with Mrs Barron and Vladimir Contreras.

"But we were spared the men in black and the like."

"Then I'll tell you the story," Cosma said, drank a sip of iced tea and started:

"Roswell is a pretty small town in New Mexico. In 1947, a flying saucer crashed there, in the middle of a rancher's field. The incident caused a sensation, and it was even reported on the radio. But the same day the military appeared in Roswell and a general announced at a press conference that the debris found was the remains of a crashed test balloon from a weather station. That would have actually closed the case.

"It is noteworthy, however, that the rancher who discovered the wreck was held by the military for a week, soldiers cordoned off the area around the ranch and the government confiscated all press material from neighbouring radio stations about the incident. Also, many people later claimed to have seen not only the crashed spaceship, but dead aliens inside as well. Allegedly, the bodies of these creatures were taken and examined by the military.

"A nurse reported that she had been present at the autopsy. The bodies are said to be still in a secret research laboratory today. These rumours are very persistent—and that after so many years! Much of the rumours may have been added over time, but there is clear evidence that the then government covered something up. If it were really just a weather balloon that crashed in New Mexico, there would never have been such an effort.

"In summary, I think it is quite credible that the men in black are on the road on behalf of the government to destroy evidences of the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials."

"Phew!" Pete moaned. "I'm beginning to understand why the person who told you about the UFO wants to remain anonymous. I'd also like to disappear into thin air right now. If we've actually slipped into something that the Secret Service is dealing with, I wish I'd never seen that flying disc."

"How do you actually know all these things?" Bob asked.

Cosma smiled sheepishly. "I guess I'm what they call a ufologist. I've been involved with the subject for years and have collected tons of material about UFO sightings and other mysterious incidents."

"Do you do that for a living?"

Cosma's smile turned into a laugh. "No, I'm actually very down-to-earth. I work for a publishing house. The UFO stories are just my hobby. I am always looking for evidence of the existence of flying saucers and extraterrestrials. They exist! That's for sure. Unfortunately, most of the incidents I hear of quickly turn out to be deceptive or even fake. But this case seems to be really explosive!" Her light blue eyes glowed enthusiastically.

"Aren't you afraid of the men in black?" Bob asked.

"In a way, yes. But that's no reason to stop the research. I just have to get behind the secrets!"

"You're already sounding like Juve," Pete remarked and looked over at the First Investigator. He stared thoughtfully at the Pacific Ocean, behind which the sun was slowly disappearing. "He is also constantly of the opinion that one should not let go under any

circumstances, even if it becomes so dangerous. Isn't that right, Jupe?" He pushed an elbow in his friend's side.

"Pete's exaggerating again," Jupiter defended himself. "He always does."

"Sounds like you guys have been in such situations a lot." Cosma followed up.

"Not exactly in situations like this," Jupiter explained. "But we've actually dealt with supposedly supernatural things from time to time." The First Investigator reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a business card, which he handed to Cosma. It said:



"Detectives!" she cried in amazement and raised her eyebrows. "Hence your professional approach at the beginning of our conversation. I felt like I was being cross-examined. May I conclude from this business card that you intend to pursue this case?"

"No!" Pete said quickly.

"Yes," Jupiter disagreed.

"Are you crazy? This thing is way too big for us, Jupe! Haven't you been listening? We're messing with the US Secret Service," Pete exclaimed angrily.

"Nothing proves that," Jupiter snapped back. "Neither do we know whether the man who threatened us yesterday was really one of those men in black, nor do we have any idea what we saw. There are decidedly too many unanswered questions in this case. We can't possibly let that go."

"We definitely can," the Second Investigator intervened. "We've been shot at! If that's not enough for you to drop the case, you're completely tired of living."

"We just have to be more careful in the future," Jupiter replied coolly. "I don't feel like meeting that guy with the gun again. But that doesn't have to stop us from investigating this matter. Out there in the mountains a UFO floats through the area, a strange circle is burned into the grass and both a grumpy plantation owner and a mysterious stranger try to drive us away. If that's no reason for you to go on, you never should have been a detective."

Pete defiantly crossed his arms. "In moments like these, I actually wish I'd never become one."

"Now calm down, you two," Bob started. "Maybe we should all sleep on it for one night before we make any decisions, all right?"

"What could these decisions be?" Cosma asked with interest. "Do you want to go back to the orange plantation?"

"Absolutely not!" Pete shouted.

"We have to discuss that first," said Jupiter, who firmly believed that he would be able to convince Pete once they were back at Headquarters.

"Whatever your intentions, beware!" Cosma warned. "If the men in black are really involved, this is about much more than a flying saucer."

"Thanks for the warning," Bob said. "And what are you going to do?"

"I will continue to keep my eyes and ears open," Cosma said. "Maybe the other eyewitness will give me more information. I'll get back to you as soon as I hear anything. I have your card." She looked at her wristwatch. The dial showed the spaceship Enterprise. "And now I have to go."

Abruptly she got up from her chair and said goodbye.

"How can we reach you?" Jupiter asked quickly.

"On the website," was the short answer. Cosma waved at the three, turned around and left. A few seconds later she had disappeared into the turmoil on the promenade.

"A little sudden," Bob murmured. "Strange."

"Maybe she was in a hurry," Pete thought. "It's all right with me. I couldn't have coped with more sinister stories about government conspiracies and visitors from space. And before you start talking to me, Jupe, I'll stick with my decision. You're welcome to investigate further—but without me."

"I have no intention of trying to talk you into anything," Jupiter said calmly. "I'm just surprised that you were the one who dragged me to the orange grove yesterday to convince me that a spaceship had landed there. And suddenly you don't want anything to do with it anymore."

"I'm too scared of these men in black," Pete confessed. "Besides, I'm also a little surprised. Yesterday you were the great UFO sceptic. And suddenly you seem to be convinced that extraterrestrials and dark agents are playing hide-and-seek in the mountains. Since when did you believe in UFOs?"

Jupiter sighed. "I just think logically, Pete. I myself saw a UFO yesterday, you even saw it a second time. So we're dealing with a UFO. It is not clear whether that was an extraterrestrial spaceship. But keep in mind that there are about one hundred billion stars in our Milky Way alone—a hundred billion! Can you even imagine that number?"

Pete tried and shook his head silently.

Jupiter made some quick mental calculations and continued: "If you stack a hundred billion bars of chocolate on top of each other, the tower reaches from the earth to the moon and back again. Isn't that huge?"

The Second Investigator grinned. "And how long will it take you to eat this tower? Two hours?"

Jupiter ignored the remark and continued: "Probably a lot of these stars are orbited by planets, too. So it would be very ignorant to assume that we are the only intelligent beings in the universe. I am convinced that life exists on other planets."

"But how are the extraterrestrials supposed to get here?" Bob asked. "The distances in space are vast! I once read an article in which it was pointed out that it is almost impossible to bridge this distance with a spaceship. It would take thousands of years! Unless you're travelling at the speed of light, but that would be contrary to all physical laws."

Jupiter smiled. "I do admire science for its logic. But it also has a great disadvantage—humanity relies blindly on the latest findings.

"There have already been plenty of scientific mistakes in history. In the past, it was believed that gravity could never be overcome. When the first planes sailed through the air, it was said that the speed of sound could never be exceeded. But we've done that by now. Why should the speed of light be an insurmountable hurdle?

"Scientists always think so terribly straight! They behave like flies trying to break through the glass pane of a window—completely unaware that there are other routes available to them. Instead, they stubbornly insist on their supposedly one hundred per cent

proven findings. They know very well that the greatest scientific discoveries were mostly the result of chance. Nevertheless, they are remarkably unimaginative in their research.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other in astonishment. They had not expected Jupiter to question modern science in that way.

The First Investigator looked out at the sea, pondering. In the meantime the sun had completely set and the first star shone in the rapidly darkening sky. When Jupiter took a closer look, he noticed that it was not a star, but the comet. “I don’t know if we really saw an extraterrestrial spaceship. But there’s something out there.

“And I will not rest until I know what it is.”

9. A Mysterious Parcel

Jupiter and Bob were already at Headquarters when Pete entered.

"Hi, Pete," Jupiter asked in a good mood. "How was your day?"

Pete waved off. "Don't ask. Mondays depress me—especially if I have history in the last hour. That sets the mood for the rest of the day."

"Would that be any different with geography?" Bob was smirking. "Or maths? Or Spanish? Or any other subject?"

"No. Except sports. Anything new on your end?" Pete went to the small fridge and took a sip of milk from the bottle.

Jupe shook his head. "Except that we should talk again about yesterday. Have you thought about what we should do in the meantime?"

"You know my opinion. And I didn't change it overnight, if that's what you were hoping for. UFOs and men in black are still too dangerous for me to continue dealing with."

"I've been thinking," Jupiter began, ignoring Pete's objection. "If these men in black actually threaten people who have seen UFOs, then the plantation owner might have been terribly afraid. Perhaps the stranger has so intimidated him that he prefers to chase away all people who come too close to his property, the circle or any other evidence, instead of breaking his silence. We should therefore once again go to the plantation owner and make it clear to him that we already know the situation and that he can trust us."

Pete squinted his eyes together furiously and slammed the milk bottle onto the desk. "Haven't you heard? I'm not in this! What if the man in black is at the plantation when we show up? Or if they're in cahoots? Maybe the orange grove and the house are just a camouflage and in reality a government-built test site for UFO research!"

The First Investigator twisted his eyes. "Pete, you're exaggerating again. Keep your feet on the ground, all right? That's something we could find out. You don't have to come."

"I won't either," Pete returned defiantly. "You can be pulverized by an alien laser weapon alone!" Angrily he opened the door to the trailer and went outside.

Bob sighed. "Do you always have to provoke him? It's the same every time. You know how easily Pete gets upset."

"Provoke?" Jupiter laughed. "I didn't say anything!"

"Exactly. You didn't say anything about his objections, but went straight to your plan. I'll go talk to him." He rose from his chair and left Headquarters.

Pete was still at the salvage yard. He strolled across the dusty terrain and looked at the junk that Uncle Titus had accumulated. Bob walked up to him. "Still angry?"

Pete's answer was a reluctant hum.

"You know Jupe," Bob said. "When he has something in his head, he sometimes forgets to ask for our opinion."

"Yes, I know Jupe. But even though I've known him for a damn long time, I just can't accept how arrogant he is sometimes. He's totally buttering us up!"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "That's the way he is. Just ignore that."

"It's easy for you to say. He behaves differently towards you."

“Don’t take everything he says so literally. Come on back inside. Maybe his suggestion isn’t so bad. And if it doesn’t suit you, you can tell him that—but try to be a little more relaxed, okay? It doesn’t change anything if you leave with anger.”

Pete took a deep breath once and finally nodded. “All right, then. If Jupe really wants to go back to the plantation, it’ll be without me.”

They went back to Headquarters. Bob sighed inwardly. If he didn’t play the mediator all the time, Pete would probably have left The Three Investigators long ago. It got on his nerves to be the one who had to take the rap for the arguments between Jupe and Pete. But he guessed he had no choice.

“Bob! Pete! Wait a minute!” Uncle Titus came out of the office of The Jones Salvage Yard waving a big brown envelope. “This just came for you by parcel post!”

The two of them went towards him and took the envelope.

“Did Jupe once again order any technical equipment from a mail order company?” Uncle Titus asked. “What’s the boy need all this stuff for?” Shaking his head, he disappeared back into his office.

Bob and Pete rushed back to Headquarters. “Parcel for us!” Bob shouted. “There’s something rectangular and hard. Feels like a book.” He felt the envelope.

“Let me see!” Jupiter took the parcel from Bob and looked at it. In awkward handwriting it said: ‘To The Three Investigators’, addressed to the salvage yard.

Pete asked him impatiently: “Open it up!”

“Wait a minute,” Jupiter replied. “Such a package is always a first-class exercise. Let’s see what we can learn from the packaging.”

Pete rolled his eyes. He knew it was hopeless to dissuade Jupiter from his game. He loves these things. “All right, the address is handwritten. The envelope doesn’t come from a shipping company as they usually print address stickers.”

Jupiter nodded. “Very good, Pete. Do any of you see anything from the writing?” They shook their heads. “Neither do I. So the mail comes from a stranger. But if you take a close look at the typeface, you might assume that an older person wrote the address. The letters look kind of old-fashioned and a little spidery. A young man wouldn’t write like that.”

“Besides, the address was written with a fountain pen,” Bob remarked. “Who writes with a fountain pen these days? Only schoolchildren and older people who value their writing instruments. Most others use ballpoint pens.”

“So the sender is almost definitely an older person,” Jupiter continued. “A look at the postmark tells me the package was sent in Rocky Beach. Rocky Beach is so small that you could deliver parcels personally. Nevertheless, the sender preferred to use the postal service—either because he’s not good on foot or because he didn’t want to be seen.” Jupiter shook the package. It clicked quietly. “And when I hear that, it’s not a book, it’s a video cassette.” Determined, he ripped open the envelope and let the contents slide into his hand. “*Voilà!* A video cassette, I told you so!”

“Is there anything else in there?” Pete wanted to know.

The First Investigator shook his head. “Nothing at all. And the video cassette isn’t labelled.”

“Who might that come from?” Bob asked.

“There’s probably only one way to find out,” Jupiter replied and turned to the computer screen. Hidden under the desk was an old video recorder that Jupiter had found at the salvage yard. He had repaired it and connected it to the computer, which now served as a television. He pushed the cassette into the recorder and pressed ‘Start’. “Now I’m curious.”

For a few seconds there was only snow. Then suddenly a video appeared—a forest at night, with dark tree trunks that hardly stood out from the background, and in the distance, a bluish light shimmered.

“The orange plantation,” Pete whispered, although there was no sound on the video. “And the UFO!”

The camera moved toward the glow. The picture wobbled with every step. After a few seconds, the last trees moved to the side and gave them a view of a meadow. Then came the house of the plantation owner and two cars, and above it the comet stood bright and clear in the sky. In front of the house, where The Three Investigators had discovered the circle in the grass, a bright light shone. Two little figures scurried back and forth in the light.

The camera was stationary, and it zoomed closer to show the two figures. In the bright reflection the contours blurred, but it could be seen that they were little grey creatures with big bald heads. Their arms and legs were very thin and on each of their two hands were four very long fingers, holding small devices. The most sinister thing about them, however, were their faces. They had giant shiny insect-like black eyes that stared into the distance and at their instruments without a pupil. The nose was small and flat, hardly more than two holes in the otherwise completely smooth face. The mouth was just a narrow dark line. They were very similar to the alien on Cosma’s T-shirt. The creatures wore no clothes. When they moved, their skin shone grey-silver in the bright light.

Then there was an interruption in the recording. When the video resumed, the camera was pointed at another location. The house could now be seen in the left half of the picture, and to the right of it was the bright glow. The two little creatures were still there seemingly investigating something. They had knelt down, looked at the ground and fidgeted with their equipment. Above them in the sky was the comet.

The picture then zoomed in closer. Suddenly one of the creatures looked up and looked directly into the camera with its shiny black eyes. It rose and walked two steps towards the camera. The picture then bounced up and down very fast. The recording ended a few seconds later.

The Three Investigators stared speechless at the monitor for a while and finally Jupiter switched it off.

“They were extraterrestrials,” Pete whispered.

“Looked like it,” Jupiter said, stunned.

“They were aliens!” the Second Investigator cried, but this time his voice was loud and shrill. “They were actually there, at that plantation! They landed there! I don’t believe this! They were aliens!”

“We all heard you, Pete!” Jupiter snapped.

“What do we do now?” Bob asked. “We’ve got to show this video to someone. Someone who can... do something with it!”

Pete jumped up and knocked over a chair. Hectic red patches had appeared on his face. “Are you crazy? We have to destroy the video and we have to do it now! If the men in black find out that we are in possession of a video showing alien beings, they may kill us! Do you remember what Cosma said? Sometimes the witnesses just disappear. We’re witnesses! Oh, man, I never should have watched that video!”

“Pete, for once, forget your men in black,” Bob asked. “Do you know what we just saw there? That was proof that there are actually aliens! And that these beings visit us! Think of what that means! This... this is... This is revolutionary! It’s going to change the whole world!”

“I’m afraid I won’t get anything out of it when I’m dead,” Pete said.

Bob ignored that remark. “Now it’s much more important to find out what these visitors are doing here. It looked like they were looking for something—or investigating something. Would they like to contact us? Why did they end up in this valley of all places? Are they coming in peace? What... what... what happens now? How shall we handle this?” He looked at Jupiter helplessly.

The First Investigator pinched his lower lip so hard that it glowed dark red. “I don’t like all this. Something’s wrong.”

Pete laughed. “Listen to Jupiter Jones, our great First Investigator, ‘something’s wrong’. If you ask me, there’s a lot wrong! Nothing’s right anymore! A UFO lands in a valley very close to Rocky Beach and extraterrestrials run across a meadow at night. And all Jupe can think of is that there’s something wrong.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just don’t think this video proves that there really were extraterrestrials there.”

“Excuse me?” Pete shouted. “You just saw them!”

Jupiter frowned. “Check out a science fiction movie. There are lots of aliens running around and they’re not real either.”

“You mean this is a trick?” Bob asked. “The video’s fake?”

Jupiter sighed. “I admit it doesn’t look that way. In fact, it looks very real. But we’re forgetting a few very important points. First of all, who made this video? Second of all, why did he send it to us? None of this makes any sense at all.”

“I think so,” Bob said. “For me, the case is clear—Cosma’s mysterious informant recorded the video, who else?”

“Then why does this informant turn to us and not to Cosma?” Jupiter asked. “She doesn’t even know us. No, Bob, the case is not at all clear.”

“All right. But in any case, we have to show the video to Cosma,” Bob said. “She knows these things. Maybe she can do something with it.”

Jupe rewound the video cassette and replayed the recording. Again everyone stared spellbound. “Who sent us such a thing? And for what? There must be a reason!”

“This, in any case, establishes that someone knows about our observations. And I don’t like that at all,” Pete said, and he still hadn’t calmed down. “Someone knows what we’ve seen and who we are. This can put us in great danger! If the men in black...”

“Now stop your scare tactics, Pete,” Jupiter interrupted him. “You make me sick! I can’t think in peace.”

“Scare tactics? I seem to be the only one who can still think straight. We’re messing with things we can’t handle! My suggestion is we quickly forget everything we have seen, destroy this video and pretend as if nothing had happened. Then no one can touch us.”

“So should we leave this mystery unsolved?” Jupiter asked.

“We could let others take care of it—Cosma, for example,” Bob suggested.

The First Investigator nodded. “All right. Then at least we have to show her the recording. I agree with Bob. We should notify Cosma. Maybe she can shed some light on the matter. It’s possible the video recording came from her informant. Come on, we’ll send her an e-mail and arrange a meeting. Best we do it tomorrow here at Headquarters. I’m curious to see what she has to say.”

10. The Man in Black Returns

Jupiter awoke from a stabbing pain in the side. He opened his eyes, but immediately pinched them together again when bright light dazzled him. Instinctively he wanted to raise his hand, but for some reason he couldn't move his arms. Someone seemed to be holding them down. Again he opened his eyes, this time carefully, bit by bit.

When he had become accustomed to the brightness, he saw its source—a lamp above him shone directly into his face. He looked down at himself. His body was covered with a white cloth. At the height of his hip, a metal bar protruded from the side of the fabric. This was what hurt him.

Jupiter wanted to move, but his whole body was paralyzed. He wasn't able to move his arms or legs. Only his head wasn't affected by the paralysis. He turned it to the side and saw a bright room with strange technical devices. Metal fittings and bizarre shapes full of rods, hoses and levers flashed everywhere. Countless lamps and indicators flashed on the walls. There was an oppressive silence in the room. There was a biting hospital smell in the air. Everything reminded him of a state-of-the-art operating room. Or a spaceship.

Jupiter twitched. Where was he? What had happened? He remembered being at Headquarters with Bob and Pete. They had sent an email message to Cosma.

Jupiter had spent the evening alone at Headquarters and watched the video a few more times. Tired, he went to bed early. Then he woke up here. But where was here? He passed out trying to make his limbs to move, but it was as if someone had cut off the connection between his brain and his body. Suddenly a sharp hiss sounded. He turned his head in the direction where it came from. Part of the wall had disappeared and dark opening appeared through which two people entered.

People? No. When the figures came into the light, Jupiter recognized the little grey creatures he had seen on the video recording. They came at him with choppy, spider-like movements, stared at him with their shiny black eyes. Then they stopped in front of the table on which he was lying and looked at his body as if it were not a living being but a test object. Jupiter wanted to say something or scream, but he didn't make a sound. His neck was completely parched, he couldn't even croak.

One of the creatures raised its long, thin arm and took a pointed metal instrument from a nearby table. It pointed the instrument at Jupiter's face. The First Investigator could see the bony grey fingers, which had no nails. The metal instrument flashed dangerously. Now it was right above his right eye and it slowly descended.

Jupiter was sweating from his forehead. Hurriedly, he looked into the shiny eyes of the stranger, in which he saw his own pale face reflected in terror. The metal tip had almost reached his head, when Jupiter finally managed to make contact with his body. He knocked the creature's arm away, fought desperately for himself. Something held him back! Then he rolled around...

... And fell out of bed. When he opened his eyes, it was dark.

Jupiter remained panting on the floor and only gradually realized that he had been dreaming. He was completely tangled up in his blanket, so he couldn't move. He laboriously

freed himself from the claws of his violent blanket and stood up. He was sweating. His T-shirt was stuck to his body and he took it off. He hated such nightmares!

Jupe went to the half-open window and opened it completely. Pleasant cool air flowed into his room. The night was starry and Chandra 7 shone over the salvage yard which Jupiter could see from his room. The comet was flickering in the warm air and although it was not as bright here as in the mountains, Jupiter looked up at it with fascination. If a comet could talk, he'd think it would have a lot to tell. Maybe he could answer some of his questions. Is there extraterrestrial life on other planets? Are these life forms sufficiently developed to be able to visit us with their ships? And have they actually been here? Were there really aliens that the stranger had filmed with the video camera?

Jupiter sighed and was about to go back to bed when he saw a movement from the corner of his eye—a shadow appeared at the top of the fence surrounding the salvage yard. The First Investigator took a closer look. Someone climbed over the wooden fence and disappeared in the dark. Jupiter closed his eyes, but he couldn't see the figure on the dark salvage yard anymore.

Had his nightmarish senses played a trick on him and that he had seen nothing but a stray cat? Jupiter was just thinking of calling the police when the shadow reappeared. It moved directly towards Headquarters, lit by the faint reflection of the distant street lamps. At front of the door of the trailer, the intruder stopped and tampered with the lock. He wanted to break into Headquarters! Fortunately The Three Investigators had a truly huge padlock for some time, which...

A loud crackling went across the square. The padlock! The First Investigator grabbed his T-shirt, slipped into his sneakers and ran out of the room. He stumbled down the stairs, swung open the front door and ran across the salvage yard to Headquarters. The door was opened. Jupiter jumped in and reached for the light switch. The ceiling light went on and he was standing facing a man dressed in black!

He stared at the man in horror, just for a moment, though. Then the man pushed Jupiter in his chest with an incredible force that he staggered back, fell down the three small steps and hit his back hard on the stony ground. He laid there, dazed. As he lifted his head, the burglar jumped over him and ran back to the wooden fence. He had something in his hand.

Jupiter got up and ran after him, but the burglar had already reached the fence, jumped on a pile of junk and had disappeared over the fence with one leap. Jupiter continued the pursuit, but instead of climbing over the fence, he went out through Red Gate Rover.

He just managed to see the man jump into a black car and drive away with his engine howling. Jupiter tried to see the licence plate but the car was already too far away. All he could see was that it was a Mercedes. Two hundred metres further, the car turned a corner and disappeared.

"Damn!" Jupiter growled. Dejected, he proceeded to Headquarters. The burglar had cut the padlock with a bolt cutter. And Jupiter had a good idea what the burglar took.

Inside the trailer his suspicion was confirmed—the video cassette was gone!

11. Cosma Reveals More Information

“Stolen?” repeated Pete. “How did that happen?”

“It’s been stolen.” Jupiter told him what had happened in the early hours of the morning. Bob and Pete couldn’t believe their ears. “I think the burglar was the same man I saw in the plantation owner’s house by the window. But I’m not sure.”

Pete hit the desk so hard with his fist that the computer screen wobbled alarmingly. “I told you so! Now the men in black are on our heels! They know about us. They’ve probably been watching us for days! But nobody listens to me.”

“Stop it, Pete,” Jupiter said calmly. “Nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened? He stole the video cassette!”

“That should be all right with you. After all, you wanted to destroy it. Now we’re rid of it, so you should be satisfied.”

Pete didn’t have anything more to say. Instead Bob asked: “Was it the same man who shot at us the day before yesterday? You saw him, didn’t you?”

“In any case, it was the man I saw at the window of the plantation owner and who looked so familiar to me. I don’t know if he’s the shooter. I barely slept last night because I racked my brains trying to remember where I saw that guy before. I just can’t think of it!”

Bob sighed. “This is getting more and more confusing. And in a few minutes, Cosma will be here and the most important piece of evidence will be gone. What shall we tell her?”

“She’ll believe us,” Jupiter said.

“What am I supposed to believe?” A voice came from the opened trailer door. Cosma stuck her head in and knocked symbolically on the wall. “Hello there!”

“Hello, Cosma!” greeted Jupiter. “Come in!”

She went up the small stairs, entered Headquarters and looked around. Today she wore a T-shirt showing Darth Vader, the villain from the *Star Wars* movies.

“All due respect! This is a real and sophisticated office here. You’re really serious about your detective business, aren’t you?”

“Sure,” Pete said and stood up to offer Cosma his folding chair. “Sit down!”

“Well, you three, what’s so exciting that you guys got to tell me?” Jupiter sighed. “We can tell you. But unfortunately, nothing to show.” He told Cosma about the video cassette and the theft. She was totally amazed.

“I know this story sounds pretty crazy and unbelievable,” Jupiter said. “But that’s exactly how it happened. There is this video, but unfortunately it is no longer in our possession.”

“And the burglar?” Cosma asked. “You think you’ve seen him before?”

Jupiter nodded.

“And you don’t know where? That’s odd. Who was he?”

“More importantly, I need to find out who sent us the video,” Jupiter said.

“Is it possible that the person who told you about the UFO recorded that video?” Bob asked. “That would make sense. Maybe the men in black are on her trail and she sent us the video so it wouldn’t be found on her.”

Cosma shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t know. But considering the fact that this video has now surfaced, maybe I can tell you who my informant is. Her name is Carol Carpenter,

the daughter of Roger Carpenter.”

“That doesn’t tell us anything,” Bob replied when Cosma paused.

Then she continued: “Roger Carpenter is the owner of the orange plantation.”

Pete raised his eyebrows in surprise. “That changes a lot, though. She saw the UFO? Does her father have anything to do with this?”

“That’s exactly what she doesn’t know,” Cosma said. “Look, I’ll tell you the whole story. I’ve known Carol for several years. She lives near the publishing house where I work. She knows I’m interested in UFO research.

“A few days ago she called me and told me that she was visiting her father and saw a strange bright disc above the trees from the house. Her father was not there at the time, but when he came back, she told him about it. He avoided her and behaved very strangely, as if he knew about the flying disc, but didn’t want to say anything. Then she turned to me and asked me to find out if anyone else had seen the object.

“However, she told me that no one should know of her. She was afraid of being treated as a weirdo. You know the rest.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “So the video isn’t from her. I would like to know who we are dealing with and who is on which side. I have the following theory—Roger Carpenter, the owner of the orange plantation, sees a UFO hovering over his property one night. He gets scared, wants to inform the press or even the police, but suddenly the men in black show up and put him under pressure. If he reveals the secret, they kill him.”

Pete gulped.

Jupiter continued: “So Carpenter keeps his mouth shut. Then we suddenly appear and discover the circle. He’s chased us away because he’s afraid we might find out too much. This is also the reason for the strange behaviour towards his daughter, who also saw the UFO.

“We saw the UFO a second time and are chased away again, this time by the man in black personally. Then a mysterious video cassette appears showing extraterrestrials. But this proof is now not with us as the mysterious man in black or one of his colleagues broke in and stole it. One question remains—who sent us the video? Carol didn’t do it, as we now know.

“Then there are two more possibilities—either it was Roger Carpenter who couldn’t stand the pressure any longer and tried to contact someone and pass the evidence to him as a desperate cry for help. He recorded the video and knows that we saw the UFO at least once. From Pete’s lost wallet, he got our business card and hence, our address.

“The other possibility is that we are dealing here with someone who has not yet appeared in this confusion and of whom, unfortunately, we do not know which side he is on. That’s a great unknown.”

“I don’t care about the great unknown,” Pete said. “More importantly, I think the men in black know about us. After all, one of them stole the video. That means we’re in danger! Who knows what they’ll do to witnesses like us. What are we going to do?”

“Maybe we should go public with the story,” Bob said. “If this secret organization really exists and threatens people, then you have to warn the public! I could get my father to make the matter public.” Bob’s father worked for the *Los Angeles Times*.

“Are you crazy?” Pete exclaimed. “Then we’ll have these men in black even more on our necks! If they find out that we’ve blown the whistle on them, we’re definitely targeted!”

“But we can’t pretend that nothing happened. Even without the men in black, the UFO story alone is important enough to make it public. If the US government is actually hiding some information, then it is our duty to expose these things! If we keep quiet, we’re no better than them. We have to take the risk that we might be mistaken for weirdos. I believe the truth about UFOs and extraterrestrials must be revealed.”

“And what about the risk of us getting shot by the men in black?” Pete asked.

“They won’t dare come near us once the story is made public. They would be betraying their identity even more,” Bob claimed.

Jupiter bobbed restlessly on his chair. “Newspaper, public, press. It’s all going too fast for me. We still know far too little. I basically agree with you, Bob. We have to go public. But not until we have more evidences. Otherwise we would be considered crazy ufologists who consider everything that shines to be spaceships and suffer from persecution mania. Then no one would take us seriously. But unfortunately, the evidence got stolen last night. So we have to make sure we get new ones.”

Pete, who again suspected a hair-raising plan in Jupiter’s brain, frowned anxiously. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, that’s obvious. We have to go back to the plantation.”

12. Pete Gives Up

“To the plantation?” Pete shouted in horror. “You’re crazy!”

The First Investigator stayed calm. “We must go to Mr Carpenter and confront him. It’s perfectly clear he knows something. He’s just afraid to come out with the truth. We just have to convince him that all we want to do is to help him. Besides, we already know too much, so he can tell us the rest right away.” Jupiter turned to Cosma. “Can you let his daughter know? She could also let us know her observations. Together we could get some information from her.”

Cosma nodded. “No problem at all. Carol will be appalled because I’ve revealed her secret, but I’ll make it clear to her that she’s not in danger. In fact, it’s quite the opposite.”

“Good. I’m for visiting Mr Carpenter first thing tomorrow afternoon after school,” Jupiter said.

“Unfortunately this might not be possible,” Cosma said. “Carol has to work, she won’t have time until the evening.”

“All right, tomorrow night then,” Jupiter said. “You’re coming, aren’t you, Cosma?”

She hesitated. “I must confess that I feel a little queasy. But I’m dying to know what’s behind all this. Okay, so I’m coming with you!”

Cosma said goodbye soon after they had arranged a meeting place and time for the next evening. When she left, Pete said: “Even Cosma is not comfortable with the matter. I can understand her fear very well. And so is Mr Carpenter’s fear. Who knows what the men in black will do to him when they find out that he talked about this matter?”

“I hope you won’t let that put you off, Pete.” Jupiter said.

“Look! If you want me to say it again, this really puts me off, Juve!” Pete shouted. “If these people are actually working for the government, I don’t want anything to do with them!”

“If—and I emphasize if—this is indeed the case, then it is all the more our duty to uncover the truth,” Jupiter replied. “We live in a free country, in a democracy! Every citizen has the right to know what is going on in this country. And even if the president conceals the fact that there has been contact with extraterrestrial life forms, then this is an absolute scandal!”

“You don’t seriously think we can do anything about it, do you?” Pete shouted, upset. “Think about that Roswell case Cosma told us about. There were certainly a lot more people involved than three guys from a small, insignificant city in California. And yet no scandal has been uncovered.”

“But it is our duty to seek the truth, Pete!” Jupiter reiterated. Now Jupiter had also become very loud. He just couldn’t understand Pete’s cowardice. “That’s why we became detectives! If you don’t care about the truth, you picked the wrong job.”

“I care about my life most of all!” Pete argued back. “You’re always the one making decisions, Jupiter Jones. And you always want us to go your way. Didn’t you just talk about democracy? As far as I am concerned, there’s not much of that here. Why? Because I seldom get a word in. And even if I do, I’ll be ignored anyway. Free country, my foot! I’m not laughing! As if I had ever been free to decide.”

Jupe's face darkened. "You are free to decide at any time. Nobody's forcing you to sit here. And no one values your presence at Headquarters when you're constantly pounding around and ruining every plan with your constant moaning. Why don't you just stay home in the future?"

Pete stared at him angrily for a moment, then he got up, opened the door and disappeared.

Bob drummed his fingers onto the tabletop. "This looks kind of familiar. But I'm not gonna run after him this time. It's your turn now... if that is what you want to do."

Jupiter defiantly crossed his arms and remained seated.

"Do you really think he'll come?" Bob looked anxiously at the watch. It was already ten minutes over the scheduled time. So far neither Cosma nor Pete had appeared at Headquarters. Cosma could have been late, but Pete was generally very punctual.

Jupiter nodded. He wasn't worried in the least. "He'll be here."

Bob frowned doubtfully.

"Come on, Bob, we've had this before," Jupiter said. "You know Pete's emotional outbursts. It never takes very long for him to calm down."

"Maybe this time you've really gone too far."

"Me? Why me? If anybody's gone too far here, it's Pete. I didn't do anything."

"You didn't take his objections and concerns seriously," Bob replied.

"I've listened to them and told him how I felt. What should I do?" Jupiter asked irritably.

Bob raised his arms defensively. "I don't want to argue with you too. I think you've gone too far, but we don't have to discuss this."

The First Investigator was about to reply when he heard a car rolling into the salvage yard. "That'll be him."

But a few moments later, Cosma entered Headquarters. "Hello! Can we go?"

"Hello, Cosma. Pete isn't here yet," Bob replied. "And frankly, I don't think he's coming. Jupe, on the other hand, is firmly convinced he'll come."

"Hello, Cosma," Jupiter said. "We'll wait another five minutes. If he's not here, the three of us will go. But he will come."

She shrugged and sat down. "I have some bad news—Carol can't come. She's got something terribly urgent to do. I got the impression she was just trying to avoid talking to her father. Anyway, we have to go alone and try to talk to Mr Carpenter."

"That doesn't make things any easier," Bob scratched his chin. "What do we actually do if we get evidence of the existence of the UFO tonight? Are we going to the police? Or are we notifying the press? Or what else?"

"We can only go to the police and the press if the evidence is clear and unquestionable," Jupiter said.

"But what is clear evidence to you?" Bob asked. "I took photos, but they have become so bad that nobody would take them seriously. Then there's the video cassette that we don't have anymore. But when is the existence of a UFO really proven? Shall we first catch an alien and drag him to the police to be believed?"

Jupiter shook his head. "The solution to the problem is quite simple—we will not inform anyone until we are completely convinced ourselves. I consider myself critical enough to recognize fraud or deception as such. As long as I have any doubts myself, I'm not going to

the police. Whatever we can learn from Mr Carpenter, if anything seems strange or suspicious to us, we're not gonna do anything until we know more."

Bob nodded contentedly. "All right. But if we know more, we'll go to the police immediately."

Cosma, who had listened silently to the conversation, nodded sharply. "Then at last no one will be able to doubt the existence of the extraterrestrials." She looked at the clock. "Shall we wait longer?"

Bob shook his head. "Pete's not coming. Today, we're just the two detectives. But we have you to support us."

They left Headquarters. On the way to Cosma's car, she said, "Maybe we shouldn't all be taking my car because I don't have a lot of time tonight. I have to leave in an hour. If you want to talk to Mr Carpenter—if he can be talked to—it's better to leave by yourselves. You do have a car, don't you?"

Bob nodded. "Just not here, I'm afraid. My Beetle's at my house. I always cycle the short distance here."

"Well, then we'll stop by your place first."

It was getting dark when they reached the valley. The sun had disappeared behind the wooded hills. The grove lay in the shade and only the tops of the highest trees were sunlit. It was the first time they reached Mr Carpenter's property by road and not through the forest. They drove the bumpy gravel road to the house and parked both cars next to the plantation owner's van. The black Mercedes was nowhere to be seen. Bob and Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief.

They got out and walked around the house to the entrance. The circle in the grass was still visible. Cosma looked at it with fascination. "It actually looks like the UFO landed here," she found.

Then they stepped resolutely towards the house. But before they could open the rusty garden gate, the front door swung open and Mr Carpenter stepped out. Again he held a rifle in his hands.

"What do you want again? Get out of here or I'll call the police!"

"Good evening, Mr Carpenter," Cosma replied before Jupiter could say anything. "I'm a friend of your daughter, Carol."

Roger Carpenter frowned irritably. "Yeah. So what?"

"I want to talk to you."

"And those two? What are they doing here?" Roger Carpenter pointed the finger at Jupiter and Bob.

"They're friends of mine," Cosma explained. "May we come in?" While she was still formulating the questions, she opened the garden gate and walked purposefully towards the house. Jupiter and Bob followed her a little more cautiously as Mr Carpenter was still clutching his rifle.

"What does all this have to do with..."

"You will not regret speaking to us," Cosma said to him, and was about to walk past him into the house.

But Mr Carpenter stood in her way. "How dare you!" he cried out in indignation. "I'll call the police!"

Now Jupiter also decided to move forward. "But the men in black will not like that at all." Roger Carpenter froze.

“We know everything,” Jupiter said. “Can we talk to you now?”

He looked around, and finally stepped aside.

“Okay. Come on in!” he whispered. “But hurry!”

Mr Carpenter led them through a narrow hallway to the back of the house, where there was a spacious eat-in kitchen. The house was sparsely furnished. The few pieces of furniture were old and not very well maintained. Everything seemed very expedient. Aunt Mathilda would probably have said that this was a typical male household, Jupiter thought. And something else would have supported that judgement in their eyes—there were model planes dangling from the ceiling, standing or lying everywhere. They were military aircraft, passenger planes or double-deckers, partly made of plastic, partly made of wood. On a wall shelf in the kitchen stood the gem of a remote-controlled airplane and on the huge wooden table was a second remote-controlled model that was being assembled. There were parts, tools and glue tubes everywhere.

Hesitantly, Mr Carpenter gestured to them to sit down. The two investigators and Cosma sat down at the table. Then Mr Carpenter grabbed the rifle as if to hold on to it. “What do you know?”

13. The Silence is Broken

Jupiter took the floor. It didn't make much sense to beat around the bush, so he came straight to the point: "We saw the UFO hovering over your valley—twice. But that's not all. We have evidence that much stranger things have happened here lately."

Mr Carpenter furiously rammed the rifle handle on the wooden floor. "What are you doing? What nonsense are you talking about?"

Jupiter was surprised. He had not expected that the plantation owner would make another attempt to deny everything. But before he could answer, Cosma said, "Your daughter also saw it when she was with you last week. You weren't at home, so she sat by the window looking for you. And there she saw this brightly shining disc in the sky, which landed behind the plantation. She asked you what that was, but you avoided answering her. Then she turned to me and I found out that she wasn't the only one who saw the thing. Bob and his friend Pete were around here the very same evening and also saw the object. And we think you saw it too!"

Mr Carpenter looked at her speechless. Jupiter took advantage of this moment and bombarded him with further facts. He reminded the plantation owner of their visit the following day, of the circle in the grass, of their observations the next night, and of the man in black who had threatened and chased them away. Jupiter avoided mentioning the video recording for the time being. He wanted to keep one trump card in his hand.

"Behind the black car was a van. That was yours, wasn't it? And you were driving it! What were you doing with the man in black? What's that thing floating over your property night after night? And how did this circle come into being in front of your house? Is that where the UFO landed? Did you have contact with the beings?"

As Jupiter's repeated questioning progressed, Mr Carpenter had slumped more and more and seemed completely resigned. But at the last one, he flinched and looked up. "How do you know about the extraterrestrials?"

"We have proof. Or rather, we had it," Jupiter continued. "However, someone stole the evidence from us. Did you send it to us?" Roger Carpenter shook his head and was silent.

"We'll solve that mystery later," said the First Investigator. "Now please tell us your version of the story. What's going on?"

The three looked expectantly at Mr Carpenter. He finally put his rifle in a corner, sat down at the table with them, sighed and quietly said: "They came two weeks ago. At night. I woke up to the sound of a car heading towards my house. Nobody gets lost here, especially not at night, so I was wide awake immediately. The car stopped in the yard, and four men got out. They all wore black coats and hats and had even put on dark sunglasses, although it was pitch dark. They came to the door and knocked.

"I got my rifle out, but they just walked past me into the house. They didn't tell me who they were, and they didn't ask questions. My rifle made no impression at all on them. Here in the kitchen, they faced me and started talking. Calmly they told me that I would soon experience some strange things. It was spooky. They said a UFO would show up over my plantation and land nearby. I shouldn't be allowed to do anything or tell anyone about it. I yelled at them to leave my house, but it didn't bother them."

“Why didn’t you call the police?” Bob asked.

“I was going to. But suddenly they opened their coats, brought out their guns and said they would kill me if I told even one soul about their visit. They would be watching me for a few weeks. They know all my habits, my friends and relatives and would do something to me and my daughter if I opened my mouth. They also knew Carol’s address and could tell me exactly what I had done in the last few days. I got scared. I hadn’t understood much about the UFO story, but I promised not to say anything. Then they left the house and threatened to come back to make sure I kept my promise.”

Roger Carpenter took a break. With shaky fingers, he pulled a pack of unfiltered cigarettes and a lighter out of his shirt pocket and lit one. Smoking in short, fast puffs, he continued: “The next morning it all seemed so unreal to me that I thought it was all just a dream. However, they did come back—or rather, one of them. Although I felt that the others were not far away. One evening the man appeared in his black Mercedes at my place and with a gun in his hand, led me over to the orange plantation. All this time, he didn’t say anything.

“When we reached the end of the plantation, he just looked up into the sky and waited. I tried to escape, but he watched me from the corner of his eye. Then a small bright spot appeared in the night sky. Then it came closer and appeared bigger. Finally, a blue disc hovered directly above us and landed.”

“You could have run away,” Bob remarked.

“I wanted to, but I was terrified,” Mr Carpenter said. “The UFO boomed loudly only twenty metres away from me. It wasn’t very big and was made of a kind of glowing smooth metal. There were neither antennas nor position lights or anything else, it was quite round.”

Again he took a strong puff from the cigarette and Jupe watched the alarmingly grown ash stick, which could fall off at any moment. Mr Carpenter didn’t even notice and went on to say: “Nothing happened for a while, then a hatch opened and a figure emerged from the dazzling light. It was small and thin and had a big head, almost like a child. That’s all I could see. It walked up to the man in black and looked like they talked. Then they exchanged something—little objects that I couldn’t see.

“The whole thing lasted a few minutes, then the creature got back into its spaceship and it took off and disappeared. All this time, neither one of them had been paying any attention to me. When the UFO was no longer visible, the man turned to me and with the gun in his hand, directed me back to the house without a word.”

“Why do you think he took you with him?” Jupiter interrupted.

Mr Carpenter shrugged. He was shaking. “I have no idea. I don’t understand any of this. All I know is I almost died of fear. There really was a UFO! And an alien! All my life I never believed that kind of nonsense.”

“And then what happened?” asked the First Investigator.

Roger Carpenter hastily blew out the smoke he had just inhaled. “A few days later, everything repeated itself. The man in black came, took me with him and the UFO appeared. This time it landed right in front of my house.”

“The circle in the grass?” Bob asked.

Carpenter nodded. “It landed there and left that mark. The third time, my daughter was here. I saw the stranger out the window. He was waiting for me. I ran out fast because I didn’t want him to find my daughter.

“The next night, the man in black came back. This time the spacecraft landed at a different location. It was so far away, we had to take the car and the van there. On the way back, we met you two and your friend.”

“Then it was actually your van we saw,” Jupiter stated.

Mr Carpenter nodded. “That’s when I first realized that the men in black were really serious when it came down to it. Now do you understand why I chased you away the day before? At that time he was here in my house! I just wanted to keep you guys out of it.”

“Some things aren’t quite clear to me,” Cosma said. “Why did this man take you every time to see the UFO? Why was he always alone when earlier there were four of them? How did he know when and where the UFO would appear? And what about the extraterrestrials? What were they up to? Do they have contact with the men in black?”

Mr Carpenter made a helpless face. “I don’t know any of this! I don’t know anything! All I know is I shouldn’t have told you all this at all!”

Roger Carpenter got up, carelessly dropped ashes on the floor, before stubbing out his cigarette in the sink. With his back to them he said: “For two weeks I have had the feeling of being watched. I never saw those men before. On the other hand...” He turned to the three and looked into their eyes one after the other. “On the other hand, I don’t think we are alone.” He pointed up.

Cosma looked at her watch and suddenly rose. “I gotta go.”

“Now?” Bob asked astonished. “But we don’t know...”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have time. I’ll get back to you tomorrow. So long!” She turned to Mr Carpenter. “I’ll figure something out.” She left the kitchen, a little later they heard the front door close.

“What was that all about?” Jupiter murmured. “The last time she left was also in a hurry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bob waved away and resumed the conversation. “What should happen now? We have to do something! If only we had proof!”

“Then what?” Mr Carpenter asked. “Suppose you still have the video cassette, would you actually show it to the police? If the men in black find out, they’ll be after me.”

“Yes... The video cassette... You can request police protection,” Jupiter replied. “We’ve worked with the police before. If we let Chief Reynolds know, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Reynolds was Rocky Beach’s Chief of Police. He knew The Three Investigators very well through mutual collaborations in their past cases.

“Do you really think they can be stopped?” Mr Carpenter asked.

“These people have threatened you!” Jupiter said forcefully. “It just has to be reported to the police, that’s for sure. Even if you disregard the UFO story.”

“They won’t believe a word I say,” Mr Carpenter exclaimed.

“You don’t have to tell everything for now,” suggested the First Investigator. “Just say that a stranger is threatening you for reasons you don’t know, and that he keeps showing up at night. That should be enough for you to get protection. The police will see everything else for themselves if the UFO should reappear. In addition, there is certainly another witness whom we unfortunately do not know yet. But somebody must have sent us the video. We have to deal with at least one unknown person besides the men in black.”

At that moment a bright light fell through the window into the kitchen. Everybody turned their heads in fright. But there was no bright shimmer in the sky to see, but a black car rolled into the yard. The headlights lit up the window. Mr Carpenter jumped up. “That’s him! You have to get out of here, quick!”

“Where to?” Bob shouted. “If we leave the house, he’ll see us!”

Then they heard a car door slam shut. “Go hide in the living room!” Mr Carpenter said. “I hope he doesn’t come into the house.”

Jupiter and Bob rushed into the living room. They didn't turn on the lights. Mr Carpenter remained in the kitchen.

With beating hearts the two stayed in the darkness and listened. At first they heard nothing, but then they heard voices from the kitchen.

"Don't deny it. Or are you trying to tell me that that car out there belongs to you? We warned them!"

Steps came closer and even before Jupiter and Bob could hide, the door was opened and the lights switched on. In front of them stood the man in black. He had hidden his eyes behind a big pair of sunglasses and pointed a gun at Jupiter and Bob.

In a cold voice he said, "You shouldn't have got involved!"

14. The Secret of the Extraterrestrials

“What do we do now, Jupe?” Bob asked.

“We must make every effort to avoid this unfortunate situation.”

“For once, can’t you just talk like a normal person? I can’t move an inch. You?”

Jupiter tugged at his shackles again. “No,” he said downheartedly.

They were tied to two wooden posts in the large barn. It was almost completely dark. A barely perceptible glimmer of light penetrated only through the cracks of the wooden gate. But that wasn’t even enough to see the huge agricultural machines that stood here.

“If only we knew what the man in black is up to!” Bob cried. “But he didn’t say a word when he dragged us here and tied us up.”

“We’re up to our necks in the...”

“Shhh!” hissed Bob and Jupe fell silent. For a moment they listened, then Bob sighed. “I thought I heard something. What now, big detective? Do you have a plan?”

Jupiter shook his head, then he remembered that Bob couldn’t see him, so he said, “No. We can’t get free that easily, that’s for sure. So we have no choice but to wait and see. I’ve got a thousand questions on my mind. This whole case has so far offered too few answers.”

“You never switch off your thinking machine, do you? Not even when we’re in more trouble than ever before.”

“I just want to know what’s going on here,” Jupiter said. “Many things seem to be so illogical.”

“What are those things?” Bob asked, but he didn’t get an answer, because at that moment they actually heard something—footsteps approaching the gate.

A moment later the gate was opened squeakily and in the weak back light they saw the silhouette of a man. His coat billowed in the light breeze. Silently, he stayed there for a while until he finally said: “So you know everything?”

“Not quite,” Jupiter replied coolly. “For example, we don’t know who you are.”

“That’s not important,” the stranger replied.

“I don’t mean you personally. That’s actually not important. I mean you and your people—the men in black... Do you work for the government?” Jupiter didn’t expect an answer. He just wanted to hide his fear from the stranger and himself.

But to his astonishment the man laughed quietly and answered: “For the government? The government would like us to work for them—both the FBI and NASA’s top-secret UFO research division. But none of them knows who we really are.”

“Namely who?” Jupiter asked, taking advantage of the man’s willingness to communicate.

Again he laughed quietly. “Names don’t matter. All that matters is what we do. You’ve probably heard of the Roswell case in the 1940s? We were the ones who made the evidence disappear. We’ve been in contact with the extraterrestrials for decades.”

“But I thought the military had cordoned off the area and then denied everything,” Bob contradicted, who had now also found the courage to say something.

“Everyone should think that too,” the stranger replied with amusement. “Of course, the government knew full well that none of its soldiers had ever entered the crash site of the

spacecraft. But it was difficult for those responsible to admit that a completely unknown group was on the spot before them—namely us. For decades, the government had to grudgingly accept the accusations of cover-up. But in reality, we were always behind the whole thing. And not just in that case.”

“And why is that? How did you make contact with the extraterrestrials? What do they want from us or do you want from them? And why is everything kept secret?” Jupiter wanted to know.

The man in black continued to stand motionless in the doorway when he replied: “Many questions at once, boy. It would take too long to explain the origins of our group to you. Only one thing is important—we have contact with them and we are the only ones who can communicate with them. Be clear about one thing—most alleged UFO sightings of the last fifty years were either hallucinations or fraud. And for those who weren’t, we were there.”

Jupiter became more and more uncomfortable. The man’s talkativeness scared him. A question burned on his lips, but for fear of the answer, he hardly dared to ask it. But finally his curiosity won. “Why are you telling us all this? What are you going to do with us?”

The man was silent for a long time. Jupiter already regretted his question.

“This isn’t about what I do with you. It’s what they do to you.” He raised his head a little to the sky. “They’re watching us. You’d be amazed if you knew for how long. Mostly they study us from a distance. Sometimes they come to Earth to see us up close. They are as interested in humans as humans are in a rare or newly discovered animal species.

“But there have already been too many incidents. Too often they themselves were observed, too often there was evidence of their visits. If we hadn’t helped them to get rid of the evidence, there would be no more doubt about their existence anywhere in the world.

“In order to further support their research on humans, we also help them in other ways—we leave them human DNA, the genetic material that is present in every cell. They study it and their highly-developed technology will probably give them more insights about humans than we are able to.”

“Why? What’s this all about? Why are you helping them,” asked Bob, who felt that the more this man told, the less he understood.

“Why? Because they are the saviours of mankind! Our planet is going downhill. It’s unstoppable as it is. Soon we ourselves will no longer be able to survive on our own planet. These extraterrestrials are helping us. Our common goal is to breed extraterrestrial-human hybrids that will be far superior to us not only physically but also intellectually.”

“Hybrids?” Bob asked without understanding.

“Crossings between extraterrestrials and humans,” Jupiter explained.

“These extraterrestrials cannot exist in our atmosphere for long. But if they succeed in crossing our two species together, a new super race will emerge that will not only survive, but will also have the intelligence to save this planet.”

“And you intend to populate the earth with these hybrids?” Jupiter suspected.

The man in black nodded. “They’ll be hard to tell apart from regular humans. Nobody will notice that the new people will gradually occupy all important political and social positions. In a few generations, the entire earth will be populated by the super race.”

Bob had a freezing shiver running down his spine. “If extraterrestrials have been experimenting with our genes for decades, why haven’t they been successful yet?”

“It has proved too difficult to work with DNA alone. They need living humans. They kidnapped a few, but it caused too much of a stir. So we have now decided to give them those who are in our way.” The shadow then remained silent.

“Us?” Bob shouted so loud, his voice rolled over.

The man in black didn't answer.

"What will happen to Mr Carpenter? What are you gonna do with him? Where is he now?" asked Jupiter. His voice sounded strangely calm and serene.

Bob admired Jupe's self-control, but found it inappropriate at that moment. What the man in black had just told them was outrageous and on top of that, they are facing a death sentence if no miracle happened. How could Jupiter stay so calm?

After a while, the man raised his arm and looked at his watch. Then he turned around and said: "They're coming. Stand by!" The black silhouette closed the gate and left. Again, perfect darkness reigned.

"Jupe!" Bob shouted and shook unsuccessfully the wooden post to which he was tied. "Come up with something! It's about time!"

The First Investigator did not get to answer, because from a distance a deep hum was heard, which slowly became louder and louder. The sound was so deep that they felt the vibration deep in their stomach. Then suddenly bluish light fell through the cracks of the barn door. It became brighter and brighter as the hum became louder. Finally the blue glow threw glistening bright stripes of light into the darkness of the barn and the roar was so deafeningly loud that even the ground trembled.

"Jupe!" yelled Bob at the noise. "What's that?"

The First Investigator didn't answer. Suddenly something moved in front of the gate. The stripes of light danced back and forth and then the two wings were slowly opened. One of the light gaps widened to a dazzling bright surface.

Jupiter and Bob had to squint to see something. One outline peeled out of the blue glow, another joined in.

Two figures slowly approached. They were tall and thin and had big bald heads. One of the two creatures stretched out a four-fingered hand towards them as it slowly approached step by step.

Bob screamed when the creature had come so close that he could see his black, ocular eyes. At the same moment, he felt something on his back. Someone was tampering with his shackles! Bob attempted to kick the creature. When he wanted to turn away from the eerie creature, suddenly his shackles loosened and his hands were free. Without thinking, Bob got up and ran to Jupiter.

Bob found that Jupe too had been freed from his shackles. They looked at each other in surprise. Who was their unknown rescuer? Without thinking too much, they ran deeper into the barn, which was now almost brightly lit. There was a small door in the back wall. It was open and led outside.

Bob had almost reached the door when Jupiter suddenly disappeared. Bob looked around. The First Investigator had stumbled. He got up again and kept running. The extraterrestrial was gone. Then another figure appeared beside them.

"Pete!"

"Come on, let's go!" gasped the Second Investigator. They rushed out of the barn and ran into the yard where Bob's Beetle was parked between the van and the black Mercedes. Next to it was Pete's bike. Hastily Bob searched his trousers pocket for his car key.

"I'm going off first!" called the Second Investigator, got on the saddle and cycled off.

Pete looked back once as he cycled away furiously. Meanwhile Bob found the key, dropped it with excitement, picked it up and finally opened the door. Jupiter and he jumped into the car. Bob started it and drove off with screeching tyres.

Bob took a quick look at the rearview mirror. The barn laid like a black box in the middle of a blue wreath of light. So far, no one had followed them, human or extraterrestrial. But that

could change quickly.

The Beetle shot over the gravel road towards the road to Rocky Beach. Only when they entered the road did they catch up with Pete, who was still cycling furiously.

As the Beetle slowed down alongside Pete, Bob rolled the window down.

“What on earth was that?” Pete shouted into the car over the noise of the airstream. “Tell me now!”

“We’ll tell you later,” Bob shouted back. “Good thing you got us out in time. We’ll wait for you at Red Gate Rover!”

With that Bob drove off. Soon, they reached the salvage yard. The main gate of the salvage yard was already closed, so Bob stopped at the roadside, a short distance away from Red Gate Rover. Bob slumped back in the car seat, exhausted. The whole journey, Jupiter had been silent, and Bob did not say anything to him either while waiting for Pete.

Pete came several minutes later. The Three Investigators then went through the secret entrance and ran to Headquarters. Only when they closed the door of the trailer behind them did they feel reasonably safe.

Bob told Pete what had happened. “And you?” he asked. “How did you get there?”

Pete then told his side of the story. “I took my bike to the plantation. I first sneaked around on the premises and there I discovered the man in black standing at the gate to the barn talking. I quickly ran around the barn, found the back door and sneaked into the barn. And then suddenly there was this light! Guys, it was the aliens! And they wanted to take you with them!”

“I almost died of fear,” Bob said. “Oh, man, we gotta do something now! You know what they’re up to, Pete?” Bob told Pete about the plans of the men in black.

Pete broke out into a hysterical stuttering. “My goodness! They want to plant genetically modified aliens on Earth? What do we do now? Jupe! Say something!”

Jupiter kept silent, pinching his lower lip.

“The men in black know about our Headquarters!” Pete exclaimed. “They’ll be here any minute! We must call the police immediately!”

“I’ll call Chief Reynolds,” Bob decided. “Right now!” He picked up the phone and keyed the private number of the police chief. It was already ringing when Jupiter resolutely pressed on the switch hook to cut the connection.

“Hey!” Bob yelled. “What are you doing? We need to get to Reynolds now!”

“We don’t have to. And we won’t either,” Jupiter said comfortably.

“Jupe!” Pete got upset again. “Do us a favour and this once don’t talk in riddles! Why don’t we call the police?”

Jupiter smiled. “Because that’s exactly what we’re expected to do.”

15. Jupiter Explains

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you out of your mind again?” Pete now reached for the phone, but Jupiter held him back.

“If you’d even think for a moment, you’d know it.”

“What’s there to think about?” Pete exclaimed. “The men in black are working together with alien beings! We have to do something now!”

Jupiter looked at him reproachfully. “I beg you, Pete. You don’t really believe that story, do you?”

“What?”

The First Investigator twisted his eyes. “For over fifty years a secret organization has been in contact with extraterrestrials and no one knows about it! Even the secret service is looking for the mysterious men in black and wants information from them. Extraterrestrials have been observing mankind for decades and are now doing mysterious gene experiments to breed human-extraterrestrial hybrids with which they want to infiltrate the entire world population. That’s the most outlandish story I’ve ever heard!”

“No! That’s the scariest story I’ve ever heard,” the Second Investigator contradicted. “Of course it all sounds crazy and if anyone had told me about it, I wouldn’t believe a single word of it. But I’ve seen the UFO and the aliens!”

“Did you really?” Jupiter asked. “Did you actually see the spaceship?”

“Well,” the Second Investigator began, now a little more cautiously, “I saw the light.”

“Come on, Jupe,” Bob sighed. “I can accept that you once again know more than we do. Tell us what you know.”

“All right.” Jupiter sat down on the desk chair at a leisurely pace and smiled at his two partners. “This case has always seemed strange to me. For some reason, I wasn’t satisfied with what we heard. It all sounded too obvious, and I had the feeling that parts of the puzzle didn’t fit together. But I didn’t really get it until tonight. I got suspicious when Mr Carpenter asked whether we would show the video cassette to the police if it was still in our possession.”

He paused to generate suspense. “I didn’t tell him we had a video cassette.”

“What are you talking about? We told him, didn’t we?” Bob exclaimed.

“No. When I was telling him about the incidents, I made a conscious effort not to mention that there was a video cassette. Cosma went with us, and I didn’t hear her telling him either. So how did he know about that?”

“Perhaps Cosma called him earlier and told him that?” Bob said.

“No, highly unlikely,” Jupiter replied. “Did you notice that Cosma introduced herself to Mr Carpenter as a friend of his daughter? That tells me that they don’t know each other before today.”

“So maybe he’s the person who sent us the video,” Bob surmised.

“Then he could have told us, after all, he told us everything else. But that’s not all. Then there’s the video itself. Unfortunately we didn’t have the opportunity to see it often enough, but I did watch it a few times, and I noticed something. Remember there were two footages with a cut in between where the camera changed location? One had the impression that at

most two minutes had passed between the two scenes. That's logical, after all, the aliens can only stay in our atmosphere for a short time, as the man in black told us. But at least three hours have passed between the two footages."

"How do you know that?" Pete asked in disbelief.

"The comet is the key. You can see it in the sky in both footages. However, the camera turned ninety degrees, so the comet should have disappeared from view. But it was still in the sky. That means it must have wandered. Since the earth is rotating, it appears that every celestial body is moving over the sky. For the distance that the comet must have covered to be visible from both footages, at least three hours must have passed. I think I know why they stole the video cassette from us so soon—so we don't discover this mistake."

"And you notice this now?" Bob asked disbelievingly.

Jupiter tapped his temple. "Photographic memory," he explained. "I still have every detail of the video in my head, but unfortunately my attention has focused on the superficial things, namely the alleged aliens. And that brings me to the next point—have you not noticed anything about the creatures we have just seen?"

"They were much bigger than the ones in the video. Wasn't it always said the aliens were only as big as human children? But those who just met us were clearly as big as adults."

"And last but not least, there's this insanely loud humming sound we heard in the barn. No doubt someone tried to fool us into thinking that the spaceship landed right in front of the gate. The light, the noise, everything seemed very real. But I ask myself—why didn't we hear this humming when we last saw the UFO? We were at most a few hundred metres away when it landed behind the orange grove. If it actually made that kind of noise, we'd have heard it for sure! Instead, it was dead silence then. No, guys, that wasn't an alien spaceship we saw there. Because the real spaceship was in the barn."

"Huh? In the barn? What are you talking about, Juve?"

"After you freed us, Pete, when we were running towards the back door, I tripped over something. My foot got caught in a plastic tarpaulin, which I pulled halfway out. Underneath the tarpaulin, I saw something highly interesting. It was a model of the UFO that we saw in the sky and on the video recording. It neither lit nor flew, but it was undoubtedly the spaceship."

"There's no such thing," Pete was amazed. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent."

"Wait a minute," Bob thought, "how big was that thing you saw?"

"Not very tall. One and a half metres in diameter at the most."

"A metre and a half?" Pete exclaimed. "But the circle is a good three metres wide!"

"I know. But who says that the circle comes from this model?"

"And what about the video?" Bob added. "There you can see the UFO very clearly. And it's bigger than a metre and a half."

"A video image is always two-dimensional," Jupiter explained.

"If you do it skilfully, you can make little things seem awfully big. In a video, when model houses are placed in the foreground, they will look as big as real houses. One has never seen the aliens and the UFO in direct comparison on the video. It could have been a deception and the spacecraft was actually no bigger than a metre and a half."

"Then this wasn't real at all?" Pete asked in disbelief.

"But we've been shot! That's a little much for a harmless joke, don't you think? And what about the aliens and the UFO in the sky? After all, a model cannot float in the air."

"I admit that everything is not yet clear to me," confessed Jupiter. "The aliens may have been very simple disguises. Remember, we only saw them in the bright backlight. There were

no more than two figures. And the shot was probably just a deterrent. But how the UFO could float is a mystery to me. The biggest mystery, however, is the motive. What was that all about? Why did they try to fool us with UFO landings and aliens? And who's behind it?"

"Do you have a theory yet?" Bob asked.

Jupiter shook his head. "The masterminds seem to be Mr Carpenter and the man in black—whoever that is. The rest is a complete mystery to me. But we will solve it."

"And how?"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "I'm still working on that. We have to confront Roger Carpenter. I just don't know how, where and when yet."

"What about the other men in black?" Pete asked. "Who knows how many opponents we're actually up against."

The First Investigator sighed. "You don't get it again, do you? If my theory is correct and everyone is under the same roof, then this secret society is nothing but mere fiction and there has always been only one man in black—the one who shot at us, who stole the video cassette from us and who served up this completely crazy fairy tale to us earlier. He had just put on his sunglasses and stood in the dark most of the time.

"But when I surprised him here that day, I saw his face. I just wish I could remember where I'd seen him before!"

"So much for your photographic memory," Bob snapped. "It's not working perfectly, is it?"

"Nobody is perfect," Jupiter replied dryly.

"Hear, hear," Pete added. "This insight actually comes from the mouth of our infallible First Investigator."

Jupiter grinned at Pete and Bob. "I see you've overcome the UFO shock and found your humour again. So I convinced you with my theory?"

Pete pulled out his face. "I still don't quite understand all this."

"Mr Carpenter must give us the final explanations," Jupiter said. "Or the man in black himself."

The next morning Bob and Pete waited during the first class break for Juve, who was attending other lessons.

But they found that Jupiter didn't show up for class at all the whole morning. So directly after school, Bob and Pete cycled to The Jones Salvage Yard, where they hoped to meet the First Investigator. In fact, he was sitting at Headquarters giving them a happy face as they entered.

"Hello! Already here? Aren't your parents waiting for you for lunch?"

"Where have you been?" Bob ignored the question. "Are you sick?"

Jupiter shook his head. "I must confess, I skipped school. It's not very exemplary, but I can afford it," he added confidently.

"Why? What have you been doing all morning?" Pete asked.

"I made some preparations. And now I'm just waiting for Cosma to call." He leaned back smiling contentedly. Pete and Bob knew that smile—it indicated that the First Investigator would immediately keep his mouth shut and not reveal a single piece of information. Jupiter loved secrets far too much to deny himself this to his friends.

Pete made a half-hearted attempt to get Jupiter to talk, but without success. The leader of the detective trio would not budge except to continue giving his smile. All other powers of

persuasion were interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Jupiter turned on the loudspeaker and answered. "The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking!"

"Hello, this is Cosma. How did it go yesterday after I left?"

"Cosma, at last! I thought you weren't calling me anymore," Jupiter shouted in a rushed voice. "We absolutely must meet again at Mr Carpenter's house!"

"But why? What happened?"

"No time to explain. Be there at eight!" Jupiter immediately hung up and grinned with satisfaction.

Bob and Pete stared at him. "What was that all about? And why did you cut her off so suddenly?"

"That," Jupiter explained, "was part one of my plan."

16. The Mask Falls

So far for the rest of the evening, Bob and Pete had not managed to get Jupe to talk. He only gave one reply: "It is better if you don't know about it now." The three then went on with their own businesses, with Jupiter playing chess against the computer again.

At one instance, Uncle Titus's old pick-up truck rolled into the salvage yard. Excitedly, Jupe left Headquarters and went to discuss something to his uncle, only to return silently and smiling contentedly. Other than that, there were no other significant happenings.

Now it was just before eight, it was already dark and they were a short distance away from Mr Carpenter's house.

"And what do we do if he's not there?" Bob asked.

"He'll be there," Jupiter replied confidently.

"And if not?"

"Trust me!" Jupiter smiled confidently as Bob turned into the small dirt road leading to Mr Carpenter's house.

"Cosma's here," Bob said when he discovered her car. "But the black Mercedes is nowhere to be seen."

"Of course not," Jupiter replied.

"Did you expect this?" Bob stopped his car.

The Three Investigators got out, walked around the house and rang the doorbell. Roger Carpenter swung the door open almost instantly, as if he had been waiting behind it, and stared at the three in horror.

"Are you crazy to show up here again? You're lucky you got away with it yesterday! But I'm sure I'm still being watched. The men in black can..."

"May we come in?" Jupiter abruptly interrupted him.

Surprised, Mr Carpenter involuntarily stepped back. Jupiter took this as an invitation and walked past him into the house. Bob and Pete followed him. Before Mr Carpenter could say anything, they went straight into the kitchen. There sat Cosma, who jumped up immediately.

"Jupiter, what happened here?" she asked. "I just got here and Mr Carpenter briefly told me what happened yesterday after I left. That's unbelievable! Did you call the police? We have to do something!"

"We don't have to," Jupiter replied calmly.

"Excuse me?" Cosma asked.

"We'll explain it to you." He turned to Mr Carpenter. "And you too. In every detail."

"What are you talking about?" Carpenter started. "The men in black..."

"They don't exist," Jupiter interrupted him again. "We don't buy your story anymore. You've made mistakes. The first and most serious mistake was sending us the video cassette."

And with that, Jupiter began to present his observations and conclusions to the speechless Mr Carpenter—calm and factual, but determined as it was his way. He left no detail out and watched with satisfaction as Mr Carpenter slowly collapsed and Cosma's eyes grew bigger and bigger in amazement.

“They’ve given us a really cinematic UFO story. Everything fits together at first, anyway. Until the spectacular showdown last night, which under normal circumstances would surely have caused me to call the police. But this hair-raising story about the aliens and their plans was too much for me. I’d still have believed in the men in black. But conspiracies against the US government? Gene experiments? Mixed breeds? That was a little too much. You wanted us to go public with the story, didn’t you? That was the plan. But why? I don’t understand that. What’s the motive?”

“That’s incredible, Jupiter!” Cosma shouted and then turned angrily to Mr Carpenter. “Are these accusations true? Are you behind this whole thing?”

Roger Carpenter scowled at her. “No more games, Cosma. If they’ve got me figured out, I don’t want you to get away with it.” He looked at the three of them. “Cosma has more to do with this than you think.”

“Cosma?” Pete asked irritably. “Why Cosma?” He looked at her, bewildered.

She just shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know what he’s talking about!”

Mr Carpenter took a deep breath, but Jupiter beat him to it. “Yes, you do. You don’t have to act surprised anymore, Cosma. You’re in cahoots with Carpenter, that’s the only logical explanation.”

“Jupiter!” She cried indignantly “Why...”

“You were the one who provided us with the necessary information to keep us in line,” the First Investigator interrupted. “Whenever we got stuck, you were there to give us another bite of the cherry. And you were the only one who knew about every one of our steps and made sure that every time we showed up here we got to see a perfect show.

“Today you called Mr Carpenter to tell him that we still hadn’t called the police and would come back here again. You couldn’t have known we knew everything. So you, Mr Carpenter, have summoned the man in black to scare us one last time.”

Even before the horrified Cosma could reply, Jupiter took two big steps to the living room door and swung it open.

There was the man in black! He backed away, startled. He had his dark sunglasses, but he didn’t seem threatening anymore.

He lowered his shoulders and entered the kitchen dejected. There he leaned against the wall. “I guess that’s it, then. Not bad, Jupiter. I really thought I could fool you.”

“I can’t understand a thing at all,” Pete complained. “Somebody wants to explain to me what’s going on? Who are you, sir? And what do you have to do with this, Cosma?”

The man in black sighed. “Time to unmask, huh?” He slowly raised his hand and took off his sunglasses.

A haggard face with bright, alert eyes came to the fore.

“You’re the man I surprised at our Headquarters,” Jupiter said, narrowing his eyes. “I know you. I just don’t know where you come from, but somewhere I’ve seen you before. Maybe in the papers or on TV?”

The man nodded. “Possibly. My name is...”

Bob beat him to it—“Vladimir Contreras!”

17. More Revelations

“That’s right, Bob!” Jupiter shouted enthusiastically. “Vladimir Contreras! You’re the man who wrote all those books about aliens and UFOs!”

The man nodded. “Yes, I am Vladimir Contreras.”

Jupiter continued: “I only recently saw your photo in the newspaper. You had a reading in Rocky Beach, but I didn’t think of it right away!”

“We’ve dealt with you before, but I don’t think you know us. A Mrs Barron, who lives around here is a big fan of yours. She is a member of the Blue Star Mission. In this connection we had a case in which the UFO faith of your followers was exploited. Some unpleasant contemporaries took advantage of the theories you put forward in your bestseller *They Walk Among Us*.”

Vladimir Contreras smiled and shook his head. “The Blue Star Mission... With these gullible people, I have earned my living for years. Actually, I was planning on doing the same thing with you guys.”

“You wanted to make us UFO believers?” Pete asked in surprise. “Why?”

He sighed. “I think I owe you an explanation.”

Pete nodded. “We think you do too.”

Mr Contreras took off his uncomfortable and now superfluous coat and sat down at the table. “I used to keep my head above water with jobs. I never had much money. One day I had the idea to write a book about extraterrestrial visitors for fun. I put together the most absurd theories, wrote them down and sent them to a publisher. The whole thing was not meant to be serious at all, because I did not believe in what I wrote.

“To my great surprise, however, the manuscript was accepted, the book appeared and quickly became a bestseller. Ufologists from all over the world praised me to the skies and before I knew it, I was suddenly the new cult figure in UFO research, because my supposedly ground-breaking theories had revolutionized the whole UFO logic. I didn’t even know what happened to me and wanted to clear up the scam, but the publisher advised me to continue playing the role. After all, we both did a good job. So I became famous. The press may have labelled me a crackpot, but the fans loved me.”

“Are you saying you’ve been playing a role all along?” Pete asked incredulously.

Contreras nodded. “It wasn’t always easy, but for the money I made, I took it. I wrote one book after another and it was a huge business. UFO books became more and more popular, and that has sparked off many imitators. Suddenly the market was flooded with UFO literature—up till today.

“The business is booming like never before, many things have UFOs and aliens. T-shirts like Cosma’s didn’t even exist a few years ago.” He pointed to Cosma’s T-shirt, from which the eerie alien stared at them again.

“In the meantime, hardly any TV series or talk show can do without UFOs. There are hundreds of novels that deal with the UFO theme. Even children’s books are not spared. Unfortunately, this made it more and more difficult for me to sell my books. The last one from me was a flop. The market has simply become too big to hold its own. So Cosma, who works in my publishing house, and I had an interesting idea. We wanted to stage a media

spectacle—bring a book onto the market that doesn't deal with mere theories, but has a real case on the subject.”

“A case you staged yourself,” Jupiter said.

Vladimir Contreras nodded. “We wanted to develop a UFO case that would convince everyone. We wanted to make it as spectacular, but at the same time as obscure as possible. So we invented the flying saucer and the aliens and mixed it with the rumours of the mysterious men in black I was playing the part of. Cosma contacted an old acquaintance and told him about it. That's Mr Carpenter here.”

“I needed money badly,” Mr Carpenter explained. “The plantation has been yielding far too little for years. Cosma asked me if I wanted to make my property available for the UFO spectacle and help with the implementation. I thought the idea was completely crazy, but it was about my existence. In a few years, I would have had to sell the plantation. So I went along with it. My first task was to construct a UFO. It should look credible and above all fly credibly.”

“I saw it in the barn,” Jupiter said. “But how did you get it to fly?”

“You are very talented when it comes to model airplanes,” Bob said with a look at the models hanging and standing everywhere. “But that thing we saw wasn't a remote-controlled aircraft, was it? It stayed in the air! No aircraft can do that.”

Carpenter smiled. “Not an aircraft, but a helicopter. I built a disc-shaped model that is held in the air by a rotor. Inside I installed some small but very bright halogen lamps so that the UFO lights up. It took me weeks of work, but it was worth it. From a distance you can neither see nor hear the rotor. The model is only one and a half metres in diameter, but if you see lighted up it in the sky, you can hardly estimate its size. We had the UFO model take off for a test flight at night. And you just happened to see it. And the creepy light on the edge of the forest you told me about must have been the headlights of the van we used to transport the model.”

“Then the shadowy figures we saw in the light were probably just you,” Bob suspected and couldn't help grinning.

“When you showed up here the next day, we realized that we had been seen, although this was not yet planned. We were still in the preparation phase for our spectacle. So I quickly chased you away because I didn't want you to find out anything.”

“But then it became clear to us that it was actually a fortunate coincidence or fate to have had you as witnesses,” continued Vladimir Contreras. “I found your wallet, Pete, and in it your business cards. You've already solved a few cases and are not exactly unknown in Rocky Beach. Cosma told me she'd read about you in the papers before. So you were exactly the people we needed for our plan—the perfect witnesses. You'd be believed if you told the police or the press, and that's exactly what we wanted—credible coverage that wouldn't immediately be dismissed as a hoax. Cosma tried to find out over the Internet if anyone else had seen the UFO, but you were obviously the only ones. So we stuck with you.”

“And what about your daughter Carol?” Pete turned to Mr Carpenter. “How is she involved in the plan?”

Carpenter laughed. “I don't have a daughter. We just invented Carol Carpenter. We wanted you to believe that there's another witness.”

Then Cosma added: “Creating Carol had another purpose. We could have let her disappear and pretend that she had been kidnapped by the men in black. I'm sure that would have scared the hell out of you.”

“We were doing everything we could to convince you,” Vladimir Contreras continued. “When Cosma realized you were about to abandon the case, we recorded a video.

“By the way, on it you could see my two little nephews in a costume tailored by Cosma. I sent you the video cassette. But then we noticed that we had worked too hectically and that the footage would not withstand a thorough examination and could be exposed as a fake. So I drove to your headquarters and stole the video cassette—which of course made the whole thing even scarier for you.”

“And all this time we thought there was another unknown guy in the background,” Pete murmured. “But what did we see last night?”

“The landing of the UFO? Nothing more than a big spotlight we put in front of the barn. We made the deep hum with the help of a simple stereo and good speakers and Mr Carpenter and I were in the costumes this time,” Contreras admitted.

“And what would they have done to us if Pete hadn’t freed us?” Bob wanted to know.

“We wanted to let you go, of course. But only after we’d given you a real scare.”

Pete angrily pulled his face. “Simple tricks, but we fell for it.”

Mr Carpenter laughed. “That’s right. There was something else you fell for. And we hadn’t intended it at all—the circle in the grass. It’s not from the UFO. That was the wooden cover of my well that I use to irrigate the plantation. I recently had the well cleaned and had to remove the wooden lid for a few days. It was lying on the lawn flattening it. And because no sun fell on the spot for days, the grass was discoloured afterwards. It wasn’t until you thought the circle was the landing place of a spaceship that I realized it actually looked like that—with a little imagination.”

“You’ve seen what you wanted to see,” Mr Contreras explained. “There was never more than a discoloured lawn, lots of light and dim shadows. But you were already so obsessed with the UFO idea that you immediately took the deception away from us.”

“It might even have worked,” Jupiter admitted, “if you hadn’t exaggerated so much in the end. Your story about the aliens was really over the top.”

Jupiter sighed. “Still, I don’t see what this was all about. Do you really think your book would have sold better if the newspapers had covered this incident?”

“It wouldn’t have been just the book,” explained Vladimir Contreras. “If this whole story had been made public, with photographs of evidence and testimony from witnesses, all of California’s ufologists would have run to us. I would have published my book about the Rocky Beach UFO and it would have become a bestseller! Our goal was to create a second Roswell. This small town in New Mexico is still benefiting from the incidents that occurred there over fifty years ago.”

Pete frowned. “Why’s that?”

“Well, what do you think is going on in Roswell today? UFO fans from all over the US make a pilgrimage to Roswell to see the site with their own eyes and to search for traces that have long since disappeared. Tourism is booming in Roswell, although it is a small, insignificant town in a monotonous landscape. Farmers, who in the past could hardly feed themselves and their families with agriculture, now earn a fortune with souvenirs—UFO models, alien T-shirts and posters. Anyone who claims to have been there at the time could get rich just from numerous television appearances in which they tell what they claim to have seen.”

“You mean this isn’t real at all?” Bob asked. “Roswell is supposed to be one big lie?”

Mr Contreras shrugged his shoulders. “Strictly speaking, I don’t know. Maybe something really happened back then. But certainly not what is made of it today. A whole bunch of free loaders took advantage of the story to make money with it. And it works—people go to Roswell, buy T-shirts and UFO books, watch TV shows on the subject and are almost unstoppable with enthusiasm. You want to be lied to!

“The need for inexplicable things and uncanny occurrences is very great, perhaps because the rest of the world has already been explored and there is simply no more room for secrets and puzzles. So what’s wrong with giving people what they want and earning money with it?”

“What else did you want to do besides publishing the book?” Jupiter asked.

“We wanted to make this valley a pilgrimage site for ufologists. People would have flocked in droves to see the place where the aliens landed with their own eyes. We could have fenced in the compound and charged for entry.”

“It could have saved my plantation,” Mr Carpenter said.

“Have you ever been afraid that your fraud might be discovered?” Jupiter asked. “The more people knew about this, the more questions would be asked. Sooner or later, they probably would have spotted contradictions.”

Contreras laughed. “Possibly. We certainly couldn’t have played the show for all eternity. But even if everything had come out, it wouldn’t have been so bad. We could have sold this story to the highest bidding newspapers and TV stations and made a big deal out of it.”

“All due respect. You really thought of everything,” Jupiter remarked. “But now the plan has probably failed.”

Jupiter looked over at Mr Carpenter. He almost felt sorry for the old man. After all, he only went with the story in order to be able to keep his property.

“Are you sure about that?” asked Contreras. “You could play your part in this. With your good connections to the police, I’m sure they’d believe you. And I’d give you a share of the sales of my book.”

The three of them shook their heads at the same time. “No way!”

“But why not? It’s not a crime! We only give people what they want—faith in the unknown.”

“It is a crime for me to take advantage of people’s good faith,” Jupiter declared furiously. “That’s cheating! And we’re not going along with that. So far, you’ve done nothing wrong, so we can’t do anything about it. But if you try to continue your UFO story, always remember, we’ll just blow your cover.”

“There is a crime,” Pete remarked. “The theft of my wallet. Could I have that back, please?” He stretched out his hand demandingly.

Mr Carpenter opened a drawer in the kitchen cupboard, reached in and handed Pete his wallet. There was an embarrassed silence. The three UFO inventors just seemed to come to terms with the idea that their plan had failed.

Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, a high, buzzing sound was heard. And through the darkness that prevailed outside, a bright cone of light cut and penetrated through the window and dazzled them.

At first Bob and Pete were scared, but then Pete turned to Mr Carpenter, Mr Contreras and Cosma with a tired smile and said, “If that’s another one of your tricks, you can save yourself. We’re not going to fall for that anymore.”

But then he saw their pale faces staring spellbound out the window. As good actors as they might be, this horror was real!

18. The Only True UFO

“What is that?” Cosma shouted anxiously. “My goodness, what is that?” She rushed to the window and looked out. “There, a bright glow at the edge of the forest!”

She spun around and ran out of the kitchen. The Three Investigators and the two men followed her outside. When they opened the front door, the bright light dazzled their eyes and the sound was unbearably loud. The glow at the edge of the forest pulsed in brilliant white. White smoke crawled across the slope.

“That’s no trick!” Cosma shouted. “This... this is a UFO!” Panicked, she took flight.

“They really exist,” Vladimir Contreras whispered. “I had no idea!” He was as white as chalk on his face.

“Get out of here!” Pete shouted. “Bob, Jupe, quick!” The Second Investigator ran to the car, his friends followed him.

Bob, in a wild rush, took the car key out of his pocket. The three of them jumped into the car and Bob started the engine. As fast as he could, he turned and sped along the dirt road, with the rear-view mirror always in view. Only when the house and the uncanny pulsating light had disappeared did he breathe a sigh of relief.

“Guys, that wasn’t a trick from Contreras and his friends!” Bob shouted. “That was a real UFO!”

Jupiter burst into laughter.

“Jupe! What’s there to laugh about?” Bob exclaimed.

“A real UFO?” he shouted out. “Hardly. That was Uncle Titus!”

“Excuse me?” Pete couldn’t believe his ears. “Uncle Titus? What... why...”

“I spoke to him this afternoon and asked him to show up here in the evening and play a bit of an alien trick. The light was a giant spotlight that I found at the salvage yard, equipped with a dimmer to make the light pulse. The smoke comes from an old fog machine used in discos. And the creepy noise comes from an old cassette player that I connected to an amplifier. Uncle Titus and I put everything on his truck this morning and connected it to a power generator. I must say, the timing was excellent.”

Pete and Bob needed a few seconds to grasp what the First Investigator had just said. “Uncle Titus?” Bob shouted with a laugh. “But why? What was that about?”

“I wanted to give those three a little lesson. Anyone who shamelessly exploits other people’s interests deserves nothing less. Moreover, it would also eliminate the accusation that we are only seeing what we want to see. Vladimir Contreras doesn’t believe in what he writes. And yet he’s definitely convinced he just saw a UFO—at least at that moment. Sooner or later, he’ll realize the fraud, but it doesn’t matter. This little shock was worth the trouble.”

“Hence your secrecy this afternoon,” Pete said. “And that’s why you weren’t at school.”

“That’s right. I finally had to shake a convincing UFO out of my sleeve. And I deliberately didn’t tell you about it. Your surprise has made it even more believable. If you’d known what was behind it, you wouldn’t have been so convincing in your reaction.”

They talked about the case until they reached the salvage yard. A little later Uncle Titus also appeared there. They congratulated him on his successful performance.

“That was fantastic, Uncle Titus! Our design was the only true UFO.”

"It was my pleasure," he grinned. "If you ever need me again to run a couple of bad guys away, I'll be right here. It was great fun." Then he looked at the clock. "It's pretty late already. Bob, Pete, don't you have to go home?"

"Yes," Pete nodded. "I'll have to go. But I'm sure I can't sleep that fast, I'm way too excited. Fortunately, tomorrow is Saturday and we don't have to get up early. What a case! I really didn't expect such a resolution. And I never would have guessed that even Cosma was behind it!"

"Neither did I," Bob admitted. "Only Jupe once again had a clear view."

Uncle Titus said goodbye and The Three Investigators stood for a while in the dark compound of The Jones Salvage Yard.

"It's a shame somehow," Bob said. "I mean, it was all a trick."

"Too bad? Well, I'm delighted that we didn't really have to deal with the men in black and we didn't see any real aliens either," Pete replied.

"But that would have been exciting!" Bob said. "Now we still don't know if there are any extraterrestrial beings out there."

Jupiter nodded. "That's right. Unfortunately, we could not solve this mystery. Too bad. I would have found it very exciting to meet real aliens."

Pete shook his head in amazement. "You two are out of your minds. I'm happy to finally be able to sleep peacefully again and you're talking about real aliens. Why do I keep getting involved with you two?"

Jupiter grinned and gave Pete a friendly box on the shoulder. "Because you can't help yourself. You are just as fascinated by unsolved puzzles and secrets as we are. You just don't want to admit it. You clearly proved that last night. Weren't you originally supposed to stay home?"

Then Jupiter got more serious, "While I'm at it, I guess it's time for an apology. I haven't been quite fair to you. I actually ignored you when it came to making a decision. Forgiven?"

The Second Investigator smiled. "Sure."

"Won't happen again," Jupiter promised. "In the future, we will have democracy."

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Well, Mr Jones is a good learner and is ready to see reason."

"Believe it or not," Pete began and fell silent. He looked up at the sky.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"Nothing. I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye... A light." He took another glance at the starry sky. Then he smiled insecurely. "I guess it was just a shooting star."